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*T*HE BEAST THAT SHOUTED  
LOVE AT THE HEART  
OF THE WORLD





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# **The Beast That Shouted Love At The Heart Of The World**

Harlan Ellison





THE BEAST THAT SHOUTED LOVE AT THE HEART OF THE WORLD

This one, with love, is for  
**MISS EUSONA PARKER,**  
who refused to believe  
she was not my mother  
and for  
**AHBHU**  
who refused to believe  
I was not *his* mother.

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## FORWORD

### NEIL GAIMAN

I've been reading Harlan Ellison since I was a boy. I have known him as long, although by no means as well, as his wife, Susan—we met in Glasgow in 1985 at the same convention at which he first met and wooed his better half.

I interviewed him then for *Space Voyager*, a magazine for which I had written the previous two years, and which had, until that point, appeared perfectly healthy. The issue of the magazine that was to contain my interview with Harlan went to press...and the publisher pulled the plug on it, with the magazine half-printed, and fired the editor. I took the interview to an editor at another magazine. He paid me for it...and was fired the following day.

I decided at that point that it was unhealthy to write about Harlan, and retired the interview to a filing cabinet, in which it will sit until the end of the world. I cannot be responsible for the firing of any more editors, the closing of any more magazines.

There is no one in the world in any way like Harlan. This has been observed before, by wiser and abler people than I. This is true; and it is quite beside the point.

It has, from time to time, occurred to me that Harlan Ellison is engaged on a Gutzon Borglum-sized work of performance art—something huge and enduring. It's called Harlan Ellison: a corpus of anecdotes and tales and adversaries and performances and friends and articles and opinions and rumours and explosions and treasures and echoes and downright lies. People talk about Harlan Ellison, and they write about Harlan, and some of them would burn him at the stake if they could do it without getting into too much trouble; and some of them would probably worship at his feet if it weren't for the fact he'd say something that would make them go away feeling very small and very stupid. People tell stories in Harlan's wake, and some of them are true and some of them aren't, and some of them are to his credit and some of them aren't.

And that is also quite beside the point.

When I was ten I had a lisp, and was sent to an elocution teacher named Miss Webster who, for the next six years, taught me a great



deal about drama and public speaking and, incidentally, got rid of the lisp somewhere in year one. She must have had a first name, but I've forgotten it now. She was magnificent—a stumpy, white-haired old theatrical lesbian (or so her pupils assumed) who smoked black cigarillos and was surrounded at all times by a legion of amiable but rather stupid Scottie dogs. She had huge bosoms, which she would rest on the table while she watched me recite the tongue-twisters and dramatic pieces I had been assigned. Miss Webster died about fifteen years ago, or so I was told by another ex-pupil of hers I met at a party some years back.

She is one of the very small number of people who have told me things for my own good that I've paid attention to. (There is, needless to say, a very large number of people—including, now I come to think of it, Harlan—who've told me perfectly sensible things for my own good that I've, for one reason or another, ignored completely.)

Anyway: I got to be fourteen years old and, one day, after a particularly imaginative interpretation of a Caliban speech, Miss Webster leaned back in her chair, lit a cigarillo with a flourish, and said, "Neil, dear. I think there's something you ought to know. Listen: to be eccentric, you must first know your circle."

And I—for once—heard, and listened, and understood. You can fuck around with the rules as much as you want to—*after* you know what the rules are. You can be Picasso after you know how to paint. Do it *your* way; but know how to do it *their* way first.

I've had a personal relationship with Harlan Ellison for much longer than I've known him. Which is the scariest thing about being a writer, because you make stories up and write stuff down and that's what *you* do. But people read it and it affects them or it whiles away a train journey, whatever, and they wind up moved or changed or comforted by the author, whatever the strange process is, the one-way communication from the stuff they read. And it's not why the stories were written. But it's true, and it happens.

I was eleven when my father gave me two of the Carr Wollheim BEST SF anthologies and I read "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" and discovered Harlan. Over the next few years I bought everything of his I could find. I still have most of those books.

When I was twenty-one I had the worst day of my life. (Up to then, anyway. There have been two pretty bad days since. But this was worse than them.) And there was nothing in the airport to read but SHATTERDAY, which I bought. I got onto the plane, and read it crossing the Atlantic. (How bad a day was it? It was so bad I was

slightly disappointed when the plane touched down gently at Heathrow without having, at any point on the journey, burst into flames or plunged flaming from the sky. That's how bad it was.)

And on the plane I read SHATTERDAY, which is a collection of mostly kick-ass stories—and introductions to stories—about the relationship between writers and stories. Harlan told me about wasting time (in “Count the Clock That Tells the Time”), and I thought, fuck it, I *could* be a writer. And he told me that anything more than twelve minutes of genuine personal pain was self-indulgence, which did more to jerk me out of the state of complete numbness I was in than anything else could have done. And when I got home I took all the pain and the fear and the grief, and all the conviction that maybe I *was* a writer, damn it, and I began to write. And I haven't stopped yet. SHATTERDAY, more or less, made me what I am today.

Your fault, Ellison. And again, quite beside the point.

So: THE BEAST THAT SHOUTED LOVE AT THE HEART OF THE WORLD, to which I bid you welcome.

My copy's the 1979 Pan (U.K.) edition: On the cover of this paperback, Blood's a purple thing that looks like a house-cat; Vic, behind him, is apparently a boy in his forties, and is, I think, hopping about on one leg. Still, most of Harlan's British covers had spaceships on them, so I mustn't grumble. And the back cover calls Harlan “The chief prophet of the New Wave in science fiction,” attributing the opinion to *The New Yorker*.

Definition time, primarily for those of you born after 1970. *The New Wave*: a term, almost as unproductive as *Cyberpunk* would be, fifteen years on, used to describe a motley bunch of writers working in the latter half of the Sixties, loosely orbiting but not exclusively confined to *New Worlds* magazine in the Moorcock era and the original DANGEROUS VISIONS anthology, edited by the author of this collection. (If you want more information than that go and find a copy of the Clute-Nicholls ENCYCLOPEDIA OF SCIENCE FICTION, and check out the New Wave entry.)

Harlan may well have been “a prophet of the New Wave,” but his foremost prophecy seems to have consisted of pointing out, in the introduction to this volume, that there was no such thing, just a bunch of writers, some of whom were pushing the edge of the envelope.

I never noticed the New Wave as anything particularly distinct or separate, when it was happening. It was Stuff to Read. Good stuff to read, even if it sometimes skirted the edge of incomprehensibility. I

read it as I read all adult fiction, as a window into a world I didn't entirely understand: found Spinrad's BUG JACK BARRON a lot of fun, Moorcock's A CURE FOR CANCER addictive and curious. Ballard was distant and strange and made me think of stories told over the tannoy in far-off airports, Delany showed me that words could be beautiful, Zelazny made myths. And if they were the "New Wave" I liked it. But I liked most things back then. ("Yeah, that's your trouble, Gaiman," said Harlan, when I chided him recently for suggesting that someone I like should be sprinkled with sacred meal and then sacrificed, "you like everyone." It's true, mostly.)

I've digressed a little.

Fiction is a thing of its time, and as times change so does our take on the fiction. Consider the Reagan section of "Santa Claus vs. S.P.I.D.E.R." consider Reagan's final smile "like a man who has regained that innocence of childhood or nature that he had somehow lost." Scary, in a way Harlan never intended, writing about the pompadoured Governor of California. Yet in another few years Reagan and his smile will have begun to lose meaning. He'll lose significance, become a name in the past for the readers, an odd historical name (I'm just old enough to know why the Spiro Agnew gag was funny), just as the who and the what and the why of the New Wave fade into the black. In a couple of his books James Branch Cabell footnoted the famous of his time—something that was viewed as (and was perhaps partly) an ironic comment—after all, who, today, would bother with an explanatory footnote of John Grisham or John Major or Howard Stern But Cabell's ironic footnotes are now useful information. Time passes. We forget. The bestselling novel in 1925 was (I am informed by Steve Brust) SOUNDINGS by A. Hamilton Gibbs. Huh? And who? Still, "Santa Claus..." works, and will keep working as long as there are B-movie spy plots to deconstruct; and as long as there is injustice.

It's true of the rest of the tales herein. They remain relevant; the only thing in the anthology that feels dated is the Introduction, as Harlan grooves to Jimi Hendrix and points to Piers Anthony as an underground writer. But hell, no one reads introductions anyway. (Admit it. You're not reading this, are you?)

And along with Spiro Agnew and A. Hamilton Gibbs and Howard Stern, the anecdotes and tales and the Legend in His Own Lifetime stuff about Harlan (most of which is, more or less, true-ish) and all the Gutzon Borglum stuff (and I ought to have given Gutzon, who carved the presidential faces into Mount Rushmore, his own footnote) will also be forgotten.

But the stories last. The stories remain.

"To be eccentric," says Miss Webster, dead for fifteen years, in the back of my head, her voice dry, her elocution perfect, "you must first

know your circle.” Know the rules before you break them. Learn how to draw, then break the rules of drawing. Learn to craft a story and *then* show people things they’ve seen before in ways they’ve never seen.

That’s what these stories are about. Some of them are quite brilliant, and they sparkle and glitter and shine and wound and howl, and some of them aren’t; but in all of them you can see Harlan experimenting, trying new things, new techniques, new voices: craft and voices he’d later refine into the calm assurance of, say, DEATHBIRD STORIES, his examination of the myths we live by; into the stories of SHATTERDAY, in which he took apart, hard, the cannibalistic relationship between the writer and the story; or the bitter elegies of ANGRY CANDY.

He knew his circle; and he dared to go outside it.

Being preamble to Harlan is a strange and scary business. I take down the battered and thumbed and treasured paperbacks from the bookshelves and look at them, and there’s Harlan on the back cover, with a pipe or a typewriter, and I wonder at how *young* he looks (it would be foolish to remark that Harlan is the youngest a-whisker-away-from-sixty-year-old I’ve ever met—it’s patronizing and implies that it’s a wonder that he’s still in full possession of his faculties and capable of telling the Mah-jongg tiles apart; but he has a sense of wonder that’s been beaten out of most people by the time they hit their twenties, and a certain cyclonic energy that puts me in mind of my eight-year-old daughter Holly, or of a particularly fiendish explosive device with a ferocious sense of humour; and more than that, he still has convictions and the courage of them); and I then realize the company I’m in, and I reread Stephen King’s introduction to STALKING THE NIGHTMARE and watch Steve making the same points I’m trying so haltingly to make, that it’s not about the personality, or the tales about Harlan, or even about Harlan the person. It’s not about having the pleasure it gave me to hand Harlan the World Fantasy Award for Life Achievement, nor is it about the stunned expressions on the faces of the assembled banquetters, as they listened to his humble and gracious acceptance speech. (I lie through my teeth. Not humble. Not even very gracious. Very funny, though. And they *were* stunned).

Really, all it’s about is a shelf of books, and a pile of stories, written as well as he could write them when he wrote them, which is *not* beside the point; which is, in fact, the whole point.

And Harlan continues to write, well, and passionately, and

fiercely. (I commend to your attention his story “The Man Who Rowed Christopher Columbus Ashore” in the 1993 BEST AMERICAN SHORT STORIES collection—every bit as experimental as anything produced in the wildest excesses of the New Wave, and entirely successful. He knows his circle. He is willing to explore outside it.)

So: twelve stories follow.

These are not stories that should be forgotten; and some of you are about to read them for the first time.

Prepare to leave the circle, with a more-than-capable guide.

I envy you.

Neil Gaiman / December 1993

## INTRODUCTION

### The Waves in Rio

Standing in the hotel window staring out at the Atlantic Ocean, nightcrashing onto the Copacabana beach. Down in Brazil on a fool's mission, talking to myself. Standing in the window of a stranger whom I suddenly know well, while down the Avenida Atlantica in another window, one I know well, who has suddenly become a stranger.

Watching the onyx waves rippling in toward shore, suddenly facing out like green bottle glass, cresting white with lace, reaching, pawing toward shore, and spasming once finally, before vanishing into the sponge sand. I am a noble moron. I compose a poem.

My poem says, standing here, staring out across the works of man, wondering what the hell I'm doing here, an alien in a place he can never know...and there are the waves. Boiling across two thousand miles of emptiness in the terrible darkness, all alone, all the way from Lagos like the Gold Coast blacks who came, stacked belly-to-butt like spoons in the bellies and butts of alien ships. All that way, racing so far, to hurl themselves up on this alien beach, like me.

Now why in the name of reason would anyone, anything, travel that far...just to be alone?

Christ on the mountain looks down over Rio de Janeiro, arms spread, benediction silently flowing from stone lips. He was sculpted by an Italian, and brought to this mountain, staring off toward Sugar Loaf. There are lights hidden in Christ. Once a year—you know when—a remote switch is thrown at the other end of those lights, in the Vatican, and the Pope lights *Cristo Redentor*.

This is the Christ of the wealthy who live in the bauhaus apartments out along Leblon; the Christ of the blue carpet bettors at the Jockey Club; the Christ of those who dine on *fondue orientale* at the Swiss Chalet; the Christ of those who sail into Rio harbor on proud white yachts so proud and so white the sun blinds anyone staring directly at them. This is the Christ on the mountain.

Rio de Janeiro is a city of startling contrasts: from the yachts and the Jockey Club and the bauhaus apartments...to the shanty villages

glued to the sides of the hills, where the poor scabble for existence in their tropic paradise. *Favellas*, they are called. Down there below the big Christ, but above even the wealthy, the Gold Coast blacks have deposited their descendants, and the poor *mestizos* crowd one atop another in shanties built of corrugated shed roofing and wood slat that rots in the pulsing heat. They rise up in a crazy-quilt city above the city. And above them is a smaller hill. And on that hill they have erected another Christ. The Christ of the poor.

They are not noble morons. They are not writers who draw senseless parallels between the great white Christ on the mountain, and the little black Christ on the hill. They only know he is Christ the Redeemer. And though they have not enough *cruzeiros* to buy food for their rickety children, they have *centavos* to buy cheap tallow candles to set out on the altar of the street church. Christ will redeem them. They know it.

They are alone. In their own land, they are alone. Christ will never save them. Nor will men ever save them. They will spend their days like the waves from Africa, throwing themselves onto the beach of pitiless living.

They are no better than you or I.

I come to this book with clean hands, knowing I have done my work well. What happens with it from this point on, is all afterguessing.

I have drawn my parallels, have sighted down the gun, have sounded the clarion call. To what end?

Perhaps to codify finally for myself what my stories have been saying for the last few years: that man is building for himself a darkness of world that is turning him mad; that the pressures are too great, the machines too often break down, and the alien alone cannot make it. We must think new thoughts, we must love as we have never even suspected we can love, and if there is honor to violence we must get it on at once, have done with it, try to live with our guilt for having so done, and move on.

As with every book I've written, when the time comes for looking at it, I feel it is a good book, my best book. Later they tell me it is other things. That I meant something here I'd never thought about; and that I mucked-up that over there because I had neither the talent nor the insight. I cannot worry about that now. Later, perhaps, I'll worry and over-compensate, but right now, I am satisfied.

There are some things I want to say about these stories. Not all of them, because, as my editor at Avon, George Ernsberger, points out so

correctly, “There isn’t, really, something *interesting* to say about every story ever written—including, often, the very best ones.” But the genesis and writing of *some* of these stories may be worthy of comment, if not for possible insights into the particular act of creation of *this* writer, then as craft notes for others passing this way.

The title story, “The Beast That Etcetera,” was intended as an experiment. Consciously so. It was a serious stylistic and structural departure for me; and its warm reception by readers who were willing to go along with me to see if I could make my point, leads me to some conclusions about “avant-garde” writing, in general *and* in science fiction.

(It is not a sequential story. It is written in a circular form, as though a number of events were taking place around the rim of a wheel, simultaneously. The simultaneity of events around that wheel rim, however, occurs across the artificial barriers of time, space, dimension and thought. Everything comes together, finally, in the center, at the hub of the wheel.)

The “avant-garde” in speculative fiction these last two or three years has been plagued with a need on the part of certain critics and self-styled historians of the genre to categorize with the pigeon-hole label “New Wave.” Any number of writers—no two of whom write anything alike—from Philip José Farmer to Thomas Disch, have been lumped into this clique of “New Wave writers.” The list of those tagged with the appellation grows from moment to moment, and from journalist to journalist:

Aldiss, Brunner, Ballard, Sallis, Zelazny, Delany, Moorcock, Spinrad, Anthony, Wilhelm...everybody save Panshin and Niven (who, patently, are not), have at one time or another been pinned as “New Wave.” And each has denied it.

Because of stories like “The Beast That Shouted Love at the Heart of the World,” and because of the anthology DANGEROUS VISIONS, which I edited, I have also been lumped into this wholly artificial cul-de-sac.

For the record, and for those who need to be told bluntly, I do not believe there is such a thing as “New Wave” in speculative fiction (any more than there is something labeled with the abhorrent abbreviation “sci-fi,” though I do not expect reviewers outside the genre to exercise enough taste to drop this convenient, though totally despicable, slang bastardization of a term presently unsuitable for that which the field has become). It is a convenient journalese expression for inept critics and voyeur-observers of the passing scene, because they have neither the wit nor the depth to understand that this richness of new voices is *many* waves: each composed of one writer.



Though I am wearied by the overuse of the phrase, “New Wave” is simply a manifestation of many writers doing their thing. To compare what I do with what Chip Delany does, is nonsense. To try drawing parallels between, say, Ballard’s stories involving a codification of the “hero image” in our time, and Brian Aldiss’s “acid-head war” stories, is insanity. To attempt a lumping-together of talents as divergent as the poetic Zelazny and the poetic Sallis, is insulting.

Yet there can be no denying that there is something happening: you don’t know what the hell it is, do you, Mr. Jones, but you know it’s happening, so you call it “New Wave,” and that makes it easier to feel uneasy about, can you dig it, Mr. Jones?

Sure, there’s something happening in this thing I call speculative fiction and you call science fiction and the clots call sci-fi. Just like there’s something happening on college campuses and in rock music and up in Spanish Harlem and all over the place. What is happening is that a great many hip types are opening themselves more completely to all kinds of experiences and modes of expression. (Today, the person who out-of-hand denies anything experimental merely because it is experimental is not even considered square; he’s merely pathetic. Like a tone-deaf, or a color-blind, or a tunnel-vision, or a rabid bigot.

There I was, down in Rio, at Hart Sprayger’s dinner party, with all those glowing leading lights of sf, and Hart laid some Jimi Hendrix on the tape deck, and I was starting to groove behind it—having heard nothing since arriving in Rio but bad samba and worse bubble-gum music—and up walked the supposedly sharp wife of a science fiction “great,” and she wrinkled her snout and said, “Oh, come on, you can’t *really* like that noise?” I didn’t answer. Why bother. She’ll croak soon anyhow.)

So the thing that is happening is happening all at once. Spinrad is taking his long loud jab at the Establishment’s use of power in BUG JACK BARRON, and ladylike Kate Wilhelm says fuck-you to the accepted modes of constructing a story and cops a well-deserved Nebula with “The Planners,” and Carol Emshwiller and Piers Anthony become the writers to read in the underground, and frankly, who gives a damn which Sewell Peaslee Wright story in 1928 predicted aluminum wrap on sardine cans?

The reactionaries who are always with us...the terrified little children (no matter what their advanced age) who want to keep things as they are...who preach not merely censorship but Stalinist revisionism, in which entire topics become forbidden...these are the Mr. Jones’s of sf. They prattle about “the sense of wonder,” yet they are solidly entombed in concrete: the foundations of their pasts. They are locked into yesterday, while trying to corrupt our dreams of today and tomorrow. They tell us that these new writers, with their new

ways of saying things, pollute the precious bodily fluids of science fiction. And they say they will launch a “holy war” against this “New Wave.”

No chance, babies.

They rant to themselves. Every year, more and more, the readership of sf grows more knowledgeable, more aware of the demands of literary excellence. The fuddy-duddy yesterday can certainly be revered, for it contains the roots of our heritage in the form. But to revere is one thing, to totemize is another. To expect to hold up the future merely to let ghosts of yesterday feed on a today they don't own, is encystment. No one suggests the more traditional forms of sf be denied: there is always more than enough room for a full measure. And with craftsmen like Simak, Asimov, Niven, Clarke, Pohl and del Rey working, we will continue to find new lessons to learn, even in the traditional.

All we ask...no, the time for asking is well past; what we *demand* is equal time for the new voices. And these new voices are what the labelers have called the “New Wave.”

It is the misnomer “avant-garde,” already thirty-five years a hincty, outdated cliché. It would seem those dedicated to tomorrow would be willing to give free voice to those who envision *different* tomorrows, differently expressed.

One of these different modes of expression is the one I felt compelled to use in “The Beast.” I've explained what that form needed to be, to tell my story the only way I felt it should be told. Yet when it appeared in magazine form, the editor felt it necessary to *add* explanatory lines, to *change* the form of the presentation. He felt it was too difficult for his audience to understand, as it appears in this volume. I cannot argue with this editor, so I will no longer write for him. He has said in correspondence that he conceives of his audience as being composed in large part of fourteen-year-old boys whose mommies thumb through the stories to make sure they are pure enough for their sons. Sadly, I do not write specifically for fourteen-year-old boys or their mommies. And so I expect a bit more erudition and concentration and cooperation from my readers. The editor knows I won't write for him, and he doesn't think it's enough of a loss to compensate for the aggravation I give him when he tinkers with the titles or content of my stories. It's probably better all around: there will now be a lotta mommies of fourteen-year-old boys who can sleep better, knowing Ellison is not loose, polluting their sons' precious bodily fluids.

But for you, who have bought this book, I wrote “The Beast That Shouted Love at the Heart of the World” without fetters or worries

about kids and mommies. And I hope that freedom of creation sparks across to you in the reading.

...It occurs to me that I've gone on at considerably greater length than I'd intended, at greater length than I'd promised George Ernsberger I'd hold down to. I was going to relate the six-year-long chain of paranoid events that led to the writing of "Try a Dull Knife." I was damned anxious to talk about Robin Scott Wilson's Clarion College Workshop in Science Fiction & Fantasy, at which I wrote "Phoenix" and "The Pitll Pawob Division," while badgering my students to write a story a day. I wanted to try examining some of the reasons why "Shattered Like a Glass Goblin" is so reacted-to when I read it at college lectures...and why the drug crowd always bums me for having written it.

And most of all, I wanted to talk about "A Boy and His Dog." Oh, wow, that story.

But I don't have the space now. And I guess, really, I've lost the inclination.

Truly, what I feel is that anyone laying out hard cash for a book like this, deserves some new, specially-written-for-that-book material. But George is right: don't get out of hand.

I suppose, then, that the bottom line of what I've rambled on about here, ties the stories in with what I felt in Rio (and with "waves," of all kinds): the stories that are merely stories—what Vonnegut calls *foma*, harmless untruths—are for entertainment. The others are to tell you that as night approaches we are *all* aliens, down here on this alien Earth. To tell you that not Christ nor man nor governments of men will save you. To tell you that writers about tomorrow must stop living in yesterday and work from their hearts and their guts and their courage to tell us about tomorrow, before all the tomorrows are stolen away from us. To tell you no one will come down from the mountain to save your lily-white hide or your black ass. God is within you. Save yourselves.

Otherwise, why would you have traveled all this way...just to be alone?

Harlan Ellison / Rio de Janeiro 25 March 69

## **THE BEAST THAT SHOUTED LOVE AT THE HEART OF THE WORLD**

After an idle discussion with the pest control man who came once a month to spray around the outside of his home in the Ruxton section of Baltimore, William Sterog stole a canister of Malathion, a deadly insecticide poison, from the man's truck, and went out early one morning, following the route of the neighborhood milkman, and spooned medium-large quantities into each bottle left on the rear doorstep of seventy homes. Within six hours of Bill Sterog's activities, two hundred men, women and children died in convulsive agony.

Learning that an aunt who had lived in Buffalo was dying of cancer of the lymph glands, William Sterog hastily helped his mother pack three bags, and took her to Friendship Airport, where he put her on an Eastern Airlines jet with a simple but efficient time bomb made from a Westclox TravAlarm and four sticks of dynamite in her three-suit. The jet exploded somewhere over Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Ninety-three people—including Bill Sterog's mother—were killed in the explosion, and flaming wreckage added seven to the toll by cascading skydown on a public swimming pool.

On a Sunday in November, William Sterog made his way to Babe Ruth Plaza on 33rd Street where he became one of 54,000 fans jamming Memorial Stadium to see the Baltimore Colts play the Green Bay Packers. He was dressed warmly in gray flannel slacks, a navy-blue turtleneck pullover and a heavy hand-knitted Irish wool sweater under his parka. With three minutes and thirteen seconds of the fourth quarter remaining to be played, and Baltimore trailing seventeen to sixteen on Green Bay's eighteen-yard line, Bill Sterog found his way up the aisle to the exit above the mezzanine seats, and fumbled under his parka for the U.S. Army surplus M-3 submachine gun he had bought for \$49.95 from a mail-order armaments dealer in Alexandria, Virginia. Even as 53,999 screaming fans leaped to their feet—making his range of fire that much better—as the ball was snapped to the quarterback, holding for the defensive tackle most able to kick a successful field goal, Bill Sterog opened fire on the massed backs of the fans below him. Before the mob could bring him down, he had killed forty-four people.

When the first Expeditionary Force to the elliptical galaxy in

Sculptor descended on the second planet of a fourth magnitude star the Force had designated Flammarion Theta, they found a thirty-seven-foot-high statue of a hitherto-unknown blue-white substance—not quite stone, something like metal—in the shape of a man. The figure was barefoot, draped in a garment that vaguely resembled a toga, the head encased in a skull-tight cap, and holding in its left hand a peculiar ring-and-ball device of another substance altogether. The statue's face was curiously beatific. It had high cheekbones; deep-set eyes; a tiny, almost alien mouth; and a broad, large-nostriled nose. The statue loomed enormous among the pitted and blasted curvilinear structures of some forgotten architect. The members of the Expeditionary Force commented on the peculiar expression each noted on the face of the statue. None of these men, standing under a gorgeous brass moon that shared an evening sky with a descending sun quite dissimilar in color to the one that now shone wanly on an Earth unthinkable distant in time and space, had ever heard of William Sterog. And so none of them was able to say that the expression on the giant statue was the same as the one Bill Sterog had shown as he told the final appeals judge who was about to sentence him to death in the lethal-gas chamber, "I love everyone in the world. I do. So help me God, I love you, all of you!" He was shouting.

Crosswhen, through interstices of thought called time, through reflective images called space; another then, another now. This place, over *there*. Beyond concepts, the transmogrification of simplicity finally labeled *if*. Forty and more steps sidewise but later, much later. There, in that ultimate center, with everything radiating outward, becoming infinitely more complex, the enigma of symmetry, harmony, apportionment singing with fine-tuned order in *this* place, where it all began, begins, will always begin. The center. Crosswhen.

Or: a hundred million years in the future. And: a hundred million parsecs beyond the farthest edge of measurable space. And: parallax warpages beyond counting across the universes of parallel existences. Finally: an infinitude of mind-triggered leaps beyond human thought.

There: Crosswhen.

On the mauve level, crouched down in deeper magenta washings that concealed his arched form, the maniac waited. He was a dragon, squat and round in the torso, tapered ropy tail tucked under his body; the small, thick osseous shields rising perpendicularly from the arched back, running down to the end of the tail, tips pointing upwards; his

taloned shorter arms folded across his massive chest. He had the seven-headed dog faces of an ancient Cerberus. Each head watched, waiting, hungry, insane.

He saw the bright yellow wedge of light as it moved in random patterns through the mauve, always getting closer. He knew he could not run, the movement would betray him, the specter light finding him instantly. Fear choked the maniac. The specter light had pursued him through innocence and humility and nine other emotional obfuscations he had tried. He had to do something, get them off his scent. But he was alone on this level. It had been closed down some time before, to purge it of residue emotions. Had he not been so terribly confused after the killings, had he not been drowning in disorientation, he would never have trapped himself on a closed level.

Now that he was here, there was nowhere to hide, nowhere to escape the specter light that would systematically hunt him down. Then they would purge *him*.

The maniac took the one final chance; he closed down his mind, all seven brains, even as the mauve level was closed down. He shut off all thought, banked the fires of emotion, broke the neural circuits that fed power to his mind. Like a great machine phasing down from peak efficiency, his thoughts slackened and wilted and grew pale. Then there was a blank where he had been. Seven dog-heads slept.

The dragon had ceased to exist in terms of thought, and the specter light washed past him, finding nothing there to home in on. But those who sought the maniac were sane, not deranged as he was: their sanity was ordered, and in order they considered every exigency. The specter light was followed by heat-seeking beams, by mass-tallying sensors, by trackers that could hunt out the spoor of foreign matter on a closed-down level.

They found the maniac. Shut down like a sun gone cold, they located him, and transferred him: he was unaware of the movement; he was locked away in his own silent skulls.

But when he chose to open his thoughts again, in the timeless disorientation that follows a total shutdown, he found himself locked in stasis in a drainage ward on the 3rd Red Active Level. Then, from seven throats, he screamed.

The sound, of course, was lost in the throat baffles they had inserted, before he had turned himself back on. The emptiness of the sound terrified him even more.

He was imbedded in an amber substance that fit around him comfortably; had it been a much earlier era, on another world, in another continuum, it would have been simply a hospital bed with restraining straps. But the dragon was locked in stasis on a red level,

crosswhen. His hospital bed was anti-grav, weightless, totally relaxing, feeding nutrients through his leathery hide along with depressants and toners. He was waiting to be drained.

Linah drifted into the ward, followed by Semph. Semph, the discoverer of the drain. And his most eloquent nemesis, Linah, who sought Public Elevation to the position of Proctor. They drifted down the rows of amber-encased patients: the toads, the tambour-lidded crystal cubes, the exoskeletons, the pseudopodal changers, and the seven-headed dragon. They paused directly in front and slightly above the maniac. He was able to look up at them; images seven times seen; but he was not able to make sound.

"If I needed a conclusive reason, here's one of the best," Linah said, inclining his head toward the maniac.

Semph dipped an analysis rod into the amber substance, withdrew it and made a hasty reading of the patient's condition. "If you needed a greater *warning*," Semph said quietly, "this would be one of the best."

"Science bends to the will of the masses," Linah said.

"I'd hate to have to believe that," Semph responded quickly. There was a tone in his voice that could not be named, but it undershadowed the aggressiveness of his words.

"I'm going to see to it, Semph; *believe it*. I'm going to have the Concord pass the resolution."

"Linah, how long have we known each other?"

"Since your third flux. My second."

"That's about right. Have I ever told you a lie, have I ever asked you to do something that would harm you?"

"No. Not that I can recall."

"Then why won't you listen to me *this* time?"

"Because I think you're wrong. I'm not a fanatic, Semph. I'm not making political hay with this. I feel very strongly that it's the best chance we've ever had."

"But disaster for everyone and everywhere else, all the way back, and God only knows how far across the parallax. We stop fouling our own nest, at the expense of all the other nests that ever were."

Linah spread his hands in futility. "Survival."

Semph shook his head slowly, with a weariness that was mirrored in his expression. "I wish I could drain *that*, too."

"Can't you?"

Semph shrugged. "I can drain *anything*. But what we'd have left wouldn't be worth having."

The amber substance changed hue. It glowed deep within itself with a blue intensity. "The patient is ready," Semph said. "Linah, one

more time. I'll beg if it'll do any good. Please. Stall till the next session. The Concord needn't do it *now*. Let me run some further tests, let me see how far back this garbage spews, how much damage it can cause. Let me prepare some reports."

Linah was firm. He shook his head in finality. "May I watch the draining with you?"

Semph let out a long sigh. He was beaten, and knew it. "Yes, all right."

The amber substance carrying its silent burden began to rise. It reached the level of the two men, and slid smoothly through the air between them. They drifted after the smooth container with the dog-headed dragon imbedded in it, and Semph seemed as though he wanted to say something else. But there was nothing to say.

The amber chrysallid cradle faded and vanished, and the men became insubstantial and were no more. They all reappeared in the drainage chamber. The beaming stage was empty. The amber cradle settled down on it without sound, and the substance flowed away, vanishing as it uncovered the dragon.

The maniac tried desperately to move, to heave himself up. Seven heads twitched futilely. The madness in him overcame the depressants and he was consumed with frenzy, fury, crimson hate. But he could not move. It was all he could do to hold his shape.

Semph turned the band on his left wrist. It glowed from within, a deep gold. The sound of air rushing to fill a vacuum filled the chamber. The beaming stage was drenched in silver light that seemed to spring out of the air itself, from an unknown source. The dragon was washed by the silver light, and the seven great mouths opened once, exposing rings of fangs. Then his double-lidded eyes closed.

The pain within his heads was monstrous. A fearful wrenching that became the sucking of a million mouths. His very brains were pulled upon, pressured, compressed, and then purged.

Semph and Linah looked away from the pulsing body of the dragon to the drainage tank across the chamber. It was filling from the bottom as they watched. Filling with a nearly-colorless roiling cloud of smokiness, shot through with sparks. "Here it comes," Semph said, needlessly.

Linah dragged his eyes away from the tank. The dragon with seven dog heads was rippling. As though seen through shallow water, the maniac was beginning to alter. As the tank filled, the maniac found it more and more difficult to maintain his shape. The denser grew the cloud of sparkling matter in the tank, the less constant was the shape of the creature on the beaming stage.

Finally, it was impossible, and the maniac gave in. The tank filled more rapidly, and the shape quavered and altered and shrank and



then there was a superimposition of the form of a man, over that of the seven-headed dragon. Then the tank reached three-quarters filled and the dragon became an underlying shadow, a hint, a suggestion of what had been there when the drainage began. Now the man-form was becoming more dominant by the second.

Finally, the tank was filled, and a normal man lay on the beaming stage, breathing heavily, eyes closed, muscles jumping involuntarily.

"He's drained," Semph said.

"Is it all in the tank?" Linah asked softly.

"No, none of it."

"Then..."

"This is the residue. Harmless. Reagents purged from a group of sensitives will neutralize it. The dangerous essences, the degenerate force-lines that make up the field...they're gone. Drained off already."

Linah looked disturbed, for the first time. "Where did it go?"

"Do you love your fellow man, tell me?"

"Please, Semph! I asked where it went...when it went?"

"And I asked if you cared at all about anyone else?"

"You know my answer...you know *me*! I want to know, tell me, at least what you know. Where...when...?"

"Then you'll forgive me, Linah, because I love my fellow man, too. Whenever he was, wherever he is; I have to, I work in an inhuman field, and I have to cling to that. So...you'll forgive me..."

"What are you going to..."

*In Indonesia they have a phrase for it: Djam Karet—the hour that stretches.*

In the Vatican's Stanza of Heliodorus, the second of the great rooms he designed for Pope Julius II, Raphael painted (and his pupils completed) a magnificent fresco representation of the historic meeting between Pope Leo I and Attila the Hun, in the year 452.

In this painting is mirrored the belief of Christians everywhere that the spiritual authority of Rome protected her in that desperate hour when the Hun came to sack and burn the Holy City. Raphael has painted in Saint Peter and Saint Paul, descending from Heaven to reinforce Pope Leo's intervention. His interpretation was an elaboration on the original legend, in which only the Apostle Peter was mentioned—standing behind Leo with a drawn sword. And the legend was an elaboration of what little facts have come down through antiquity relatively undistorted: Leo had no cardinals with him, and certainly no wraith Apostles. He was one of three in the deputation. The other two were secular dignitaries of the Roman state.

The meeting did not take place—as legend would have us believe—just outside the gates of Rome, but in northern Italy, not far from what is today Peschiera.

Nothing more than this is known of the confrontation. Yet Attila, who had never been stopped, did not raze Rome. He turned back.

*Djam Karet*. The force-line field spewed out from a parallax center crosswhen, a field that had pulsed through time and space and the minds of men for twice ten thousand years. Then cut out suddenly, inexplicably, and Attila the Hun clapped his hands to his head, his mind twisting like rope within his skull. His eyes glazed, then cleared, and he breathed from deep in his chest. Then he signaled his army to turn back. Leo the Great thanked God and the living memory of Christ the Saviour. Legend added Saint Peter. Raphael added Saint Paul.

For twice ten thousand years—*Djam Karet*—the field had pulsed, and for a brief moment that could have been instants or years or millennia, it was cut off.

Legend does not tell the truth. More specifically, it does not tell *all* of the truth: forty years before Attila raided Italy, Rome had been taken and sacked by Alaric the Goth. *Djam Karet*. Three years after the retreat of Attila Rome was once more taken and sacked, by Gaiseric, King of all the Vandals.

There was a reason the garbage of insanity had ceased to flow through everywhere and everywhen from the drained mind of a seven-headed dragon...

Semph, traitor to his race, hovered before the Concord. His friend, the man who now sought his final flux, Linah, Proctored the hearing. He spoke softly, but eloquently, of what the great scientist had done.

“The tank was draining; he said to me, ‘Forgive me, because I love my fellow man. Whenever he was, wherever he is; I have to, I work in an inhuman field, and I have to cling to that. So you’ll forgive me.’ Then he interposed himself.”

The sixty members of the Concord, a representative from each race that existed in the center, bird-creatures and blue things and large-headed men and orange scents with cilia shuddering...all of them looked at Semph where he hovered. His body and head were crumpled like a brown paper bag. All hair was gone. His eyes were dim and watery. Naked, shimmering, he drifted slightly to one side, then a vagrant breeze in the wall-less chamber sent him back. He had drained himself.

“I ask for this Concord to affix sentence of final flux on this man. Though his interposition only lasted a few moments, we have no way

of knowing what damage or unnaturalness it may have caused crosswhen. I submit that his intent was to overload the drain and thereby render it inoperative. This act, the act of a beast who would condemn the sixty races of the center to a future in which insanity still prevailed, is an act that can only be punished by termination.”

The Concord blanked and meditated. A timeless time later they re-linked, and the Proctor’s charges were upheld; his demand of sentence was fulfilled.

On the hushed shores of a thought, the papyrus man was carried in the arms of his friend, his executioner, the Proctor. There in the dusting quiet of an approaching night, Linah laid Semph down in the shadow of a sigh.

“Why did you stop me?” the wrinkle with a mouth asked.

Linah looked away across the rushing dark.

“Why?”

“Because here, in the center, there is a chance.”

“And for them, all of them out there...no chance ever?”

Linah sat down slowly, digging his hands into the golden mist, letting it sift over his wrists and back into the waiting flesh of the world. “If we can begin it here, if we can pursue our boundaries outward, then perhaps one day, sometime, we can reach to the ends of time with that little chance. Until then, it is better to have one center where there is no madness.”

Semph hurried his words. The end was rapidly striding for him. “You have sentenced them all. Insanity is a living vapor. A force. It can be bottled. The most potent genie in the most easily uncorked bottle. And you have condemned them to live with it always. In the name of love.”

Linah made a sound that was not quite a word, but called it back. Semph touched his wrist with a tremble that had been a hand. Fingers melting into softness and warmth. “I’m sorry for you, Linah. Your curse is to be a true man. The world is made for strugglers. You never learned how to do that.”

Linah did not reply. He thought only of the drainage that was eternal now. Set in motion and kept in motion by its necessity.

“Will you do a memorial for me?” Semph asked.

Linah nodded. “It’s traditional.”

Semph smiled softly. “Then do it for them; not for me. I’m the one who devised the vessel of their death, and I don’t need it. But choose one of them; not a very important one, but one that will mean everything to them if they find it, and understand. Erect the memorial in my name to that one. Will you?”

Linah nodded.

“Will you?” Semph asked. His eyes were closed, and he could not see the nod.

“Yes. I will,” Linah said. But Semph could not hear. The flux began and ended, and Linah was alone in the cupped silence of loneliness.

The statue was placed on a far planet of a far star in a time that was ancient while yet never having been born. It existed in the minds of men who would come later. Or never.

But if they did, they would know that hell was with them, that there was a Heaven that men called Heaven, and in it there was a center from which all madness flowed; and once within that center, there was peace.

In the remains of a blasted building that had been a shirt factory, in what had been Stuttgart, Friedrich Drucker found a many-colored box. Maddened by hunger and the memory of having eaten human flesh for weeks, the man tore at the lid of the box with the bloodied stubs of his fingers. As the box flew open, pressed at a certain point, cyclones rushed out past the terrified face of Friedrich Drucker. Cyclones and dark, winged, faceless shapes that streaked away into the night, followed by a last wisp of purple smoke smelling strongly of decayed gardenias.

But Friedrich Drucker had little time to ponder the meaning of the purple smoke, for the next day, World War IV broke out.

—Los Angeles, 1968

## ALONG THE SCENIC ROUTE

The blood-red Mercury with the twin-mounted 7.6mm Spandaus cut George off as he was shifting lanes. The Merc cut out sharply, three cars behind George, and the driver decked it. The boom of his gas-turbine engine got through George's baffling system without difficulty, like a fist in the ear. The Merc sprayed JP-4 gook and water in a wide fan from its jet nozzle and cut back in, a matter of inches in front of George's Chevy Piranha.

George slapped the selector control on the dash, lighting YOU STUPID BASTARD, WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING and I HOPE YOU CRASH & BURN, YOU SON OF A BITCH. Jessica moaned softly with uncontrolled fear, but George could not hear her: he was screaming obscenities.

George kicked it into Overplunge and depressed the selector button extending the rotating buzzsaws. Dallas razors, they were called, in the repair shoppes. But the crimson Merc pulled away doing an easy 115.

"I'll get you, you beaver-sucker!" he howled.

The Piranha jumped, surged forward. But the Merc was already two dozen car-lengths down the Freeway. Adrenaline pumped through George's system. Beside him, Jessica put a hand on his arm. "Oh, forget it, George; it's just some young snot," she said. Always conciliatory.

"My masculinity's threatened," he murmured, and hunched over the wheel. Jessica looked toward heaven, wishing a bolt of lightning had come from that location many months past, striking Dr. Yasimir directly in his Freud, long before George could have picked up psychiatric justifications for his awful temper.

"Get me Collision Control!" George snarled at her.

Jessica shrugged, as if to say *here we go again*, and dialed CC on the peek. The smiling face of a fusco, the Freeway Sector Control Operator, blurred green and yellow, then came into sharp focus. "Your request, sir?"

"Clearance for duel, Highway 101, northbound."

"Your license number, sir?"

"XUPD 88321," George said. He was scanning the Freeway, keeping the blood-red Mercury in sight, obstinately refusing to stud on

the tracking sights.

“Your proposed opponent, sir?”

“Red Mercury GT. '88 model.”

“License, sir.”

“Just a second.” George pressed the stud for the instant replay and the last ten miles rewound on the Sony Backtracker. He ran it forward again till he caught the instant the Merc had passed him, froze the frame, and got the number. “MFCS 90909.”

“One moment, sir.”

George fretted behind the wheel. “*Now* what the hell’s holding her up? Whenever you want service, they’ve got problems. But boy, when it comes tax time—”

The fusco came back and smiled. “I’ve checked our master Sector grid, sir, and I find authorization may be permitted, but I am required by law to inform you that your proposed opponent is more heavily armed than yourself.”

George licked his lips. “What’s he running?”

“Our records indicate 7.6mm Spandau equipment, bulletproof screens and coded optionals.”

George sat silently. His speed dropped. The tachometer fluttered, settled.

“Let him go, George,” Jessica said. “You know he’d take you.”

Two blotches of anger spread on George’s cheeks. “Oh, yeah!?!” He howled at the fusco, “Get me a confirm on that Mercury, Fusco!”

She blurred off, and George decked the Piranha: it leaped forward. Jessica sighed with resignation and pulled the drawer out from beneath her bucket. She unfolded the g-suit and began stretching into it. She said nothing, but continued to shake her head.

“We’ll see!” George said.

“Oh, George, when will you ever grow up?”

He did not answer, but his nostrils flared with barely restrained anger.

The fusco smeared back and said, “Opponent confirms, sir. Freeway Underwriters have already cross-filed you as mutual beneficiaries. Please observe standard traffic regulations, and good luck, sir.”

She vanished, and George set the Piranha on sleepwalker as he donned his own g-suit. He overrode the sleeper and was back on manual in moments.

“Now, you stuffer, *now* let’s see!” 100. 110. 120.

He was gaining rapidly on the Merc now. As the Chevy hit 120, the mastercomp flashed red and suggested crossover. George punched the selector and the telescoping arms of the buzzsaws retracted into

the axles, even as the buzzsaws stopped whirling. In a moment—drawn back in, now merely fancy decorations in the hubcaps. The wheels retracted into the underbody of the Chevy and the air-cushion took over. Now the Chevy skimmed along, two inches above the roadbed of the Freeway.

Ahead, George could see the Merc also crossing over to air-cushion. 120. 135. 150.

“George, this is crazy!” Jessica said, her face in that characteristic shriek expression. “You’re no hot-rodder, George. You’re a family man, and this is the family car!”

George chuckled nastily. “I’ve had it with these fuzzfaces. Last year...you remember last year?...you remember when that punk stuffer ran us into the abutment? I swore I’d never put up with that kind of thing again. Why’d you think I had all the optionals installed?”

Jessica opened the tambour doors of the glove compartment and slid out the service tray. She unplugged the jar of anti-flash salve and began spreading it on her face and hands. “I *knew* I shouldn’t have let you put that laser thing in this car!” George chuckled again. Fuzzfaces, punks, rodders!

George felt the Piranha surge forward, the big reliable Stirling engine recycling the hot air for more and more efficient thrust. Unlike the Merc’s inefficient kerosene system, there was no exhaust emission from the nuclear power plant, the external combustion engine almost noiseless, the big radiator tailfin in the rear dissipating the tremendous heat, stabilizing the car as it swooshed along, two inches off the roadbed.

George knew he would catch the blood-red Mercury. Then one smartass punk was going to learn he couldn’t flout law and order by running decent citizens off the Freeways!

“Get me my gun,” George said.

Jessica shook her head with exasperation, reached under George’s bucket, pulled out his drawer and handed him the bulky .45 automatic in its breakaway upside-down shoulder rig. George studded in the sleeper, worked his arms into the rig, tested the oiled leather of the holster, and when he was satisfied, returned the Piranha to manual.

“Oh, God,” Jessica said, “John Dillinger rides again.”

“Listen!” George shouted, getting more furious with each stupidity she offered. “If you can’t be of some help to me, just shut your damned mouth. I’d put you out and come back for you, but I’m in a duel...can you understand that? I’m in a duel!” She murmured a yes, George, and fell silent.

There was a transmission queep from the transceiver. George

studded it on. No picture. Just vocal. It had to be the driver of the Mercury, up ahead of them. Beaming directly at one another's antennae, using a tightbeam directional, they could keep in touch: it was a standard trick used by rods to rattle their opponents.

"Hey, Boze, you not really gonna custer me, are you? Back'm, Boze. No bad trips, true. The kid'll drop back, hang a couple of biggies on ya, just to teach ya a little lesson, letcha swimaway." The voice of the driver was hard, mirthless, the ugly sound of a driver used to being challenged.

"Listen, you young snot," George said, grating his words, trying to sound more menacing than he felt, "I'm going to teach *you* the lesson!"

The Merc's driver laughed raucously.

"Boze, you *de*-mote me, true!"

"And stop calling me a bozo, you lousy little degenerate!"

"Ooooo-weeee, got me a thrasher this time out. Okay, Boze, you be custer an' I'll play arrow. Good shells, baby Boze!"

The finalizing queep sounded, and George gripped the wheel with hands that went knuckle-white. The Merc suddenly shot away from him. He had been steadily gaining, but now as though it had been springloaded, the Mercury burst forward, spraying gook and water on both sides of the forty-foot lanes they were using. "Cut in his after-burner," George snarled. The driver of the Mercury had injected water into the exhaust for added thrust through the jet nozzle. The boom of the Merc's big, noisy engine hit him, and George studded in the rear-mounted popellers to give him more speed. 175. 185. 195.

He was crawling up the line toward the Merc. Gaining, gaining. Jessica pulled out her drawer and unfolded her crash-suit. It went on over the g-suit, and she let George know what she thought of his turning their Sunday Drive into a kamikaze duel.

He told her to stuff it, and did a sleeper, donned his own crash-suit, applied flash salve, and lowered the bangup helmet onto his head.

Back on manual he crawled, crawled, till he was only fifty yards behind the Mercury, the gas-turbine vehicle sharp in his tinted windshield. "Put on your goggles...I'm going to show that punk who's a bozo..."

He pressed the stud to open the laser louvers. The needle-nosed glass tube peered out from its bay in the Chevy's hood. George read the power drain on his dash. The MHD power generator used to drive the laser was charging. He remembered what the salesman at Chick Williams Chevrolet had told him, pridefully, about the laser gun, when George had inquired about the optional.



*Dynamite feature, Mr. Jackson. Absolutely sensational. Works off a magneto hydro dynamic power generator. Latest thing in defense armament. You know, to achieve sufficient potency from a CO2 laser, you'd need a glass tube a mile long. Well, sir, we both know that's impractical, to say the least, so the project engineers at Chevy's big Bombay plant developed the "stack" method. Glass rods baffled with mirrors—360 feet of stack, the length of a football field...plus end-zones. Use it three ways. Punch a hole right through their tires at any speed under a hundred and twenty. If they're running a GT, you can put that hole right into the kerosene fuel tank, blow them off the road. Or, if they're running a Stirling, just heat the radiator. When the radiator gets hotter than the engine, the whole works shuts down. Dynamite. Also...and this is with proper CC authorization, you can go straight for the old jugular. Use the beam on the driver. Makes a neat hole. Dynamite!*

"I'll take it," George murmured.

"What did you say?" Jessica asked.

"Nothing."

"George, you're a family man, not a rodder!"

"Stuff it!"

Then he was sorry he'd said it. She meant well. It was simply that...well, a man had to work hard to keep his balls. He looked sidewise at her. Wearing the Armadillo crash-suit, with its overlapping discs of ceramic material, she looked like a ferryflight pilot. The bangup hat hid her face. He wanted to apologize, but the moment had arrived. He locked the laser on the Merc, depressed the fire stud, and a beam of blinding light flashed from the hood of the Piranha. With the Merc on air-cushion, he had gone straight for the fuel tank.

But the Merc suddenly wasn't in front of him. Even as he had fired, the driver had sheered left into the next forty-foot-wide lane, and cut speed drastically. The Merc dropped back past them as the Piranha swooshed ahead.

"He's on my back!" George shouted.

The next moment Spandau slugs tore at the hide of the Chevy. George slapped the studs, and the bulletproof screens went up. But not before pingholes had appeared in the beryllium hide of the Chevy, exposing the boron fiber filaments that gave the car its lightweight maneuverability. "Stuffer!" George breathed, terribly frightened. The driver was on his back, could ride him into the ground.

He swerved, dropping flaps and skimming the Piranha back and forth in wide arcs, across the two lanes. The Merc hung on. The Spandas chattered heavily. The screens would hold, but what else was the driver running? What were the "coded optionals" the CC fusco had mentioned?

"Now see what you've gotten us into!"

“Jess, shut up, shut up!”

The transceiver queeped. He studded it on, still swerving. This time the driver of the Merc was sending via microwave video. The face blurred in.

He was a young boy. In his teens. Acne.

“Punk! Stinking punk!” George screamed, trying to swerve, drop back, accelerate. Nothing. The blood-red Merc hung on his tailfin, pounding at him. If one of those bullets struck the radiator tailfin, ricocheted, pierced to the engine, got through the lead shielding around the reactor. Jessica was crying, huddled inside her Armadillo.

He was silently glad she was in the g-suit. He would try something illegal in a moment.

“Hey, Boze. What’s your slit look like? If she’s creamy’n’nice I might letcha drop her at the next getty, and come back for her later. With your insurance, baby, and my pickle, I can keep her creamy’n’nice.”

“Fuzzfaced punk! I’ll see you dead first!”

“You’re a real thrasher, old dad. Wish you well, but it’s soon over. Say bye-bye to the nice rodder. You gonna die, old dad!”

George was shrieking inarticulately.

The boy laughed wildly. He was up on something. Ferro-coke, perhaps. Or D4. Or merryloo. His eyes glistened blue and young and deadly as a snake.

“Just wanted you to know the name of your piledriver, old dad. *You* can call me Billy...”

And he was gone. The Merc slipped forward, closer, and George had only a moment to realize that this Billy could not possibly have the money to equip his car with a laser, and that was a godsend. But the Spandaus were hacking away at the bulletproof screens. They weren’t meant for extended punishment like this. Damn that Detroit iron!

He had to make the illegal move *now*.

Thank God for the g-suits. A tight turn, across the lanes, in direct contravention of the authorization. And in a tight turn, without the g-suits, doing—he checked the speedometer and tach—250 mph, the blood slams up against one side of the body. The g-suits would squeeze the side of the body where the blood tried to pool up. They would live. If...

He spun the wheel hard, slamming down on the accelerator. The Merc slewed sidewise and caught the turn. He never had a chance. He pulled out of the illegal turn, and their positions were the same. But the Merc had dropped back several car-lengths. Then from the transceiver there was a queep and he did not even stud in as the

Police Copter overhead tightbeamed him in an authoritative voice:

“XUPD 88321. Warning! You will be in contravention of your dueling authorization if you try another maneuver of that sort! You are warned to keep to your lanes and the standard rules of road courtesy!”

Then it was queeped, and George felt the universe settling like silt over him. He was being killed by the system.

He'd have to eject. The seat would save him and Jessica. He tried to tell her, but she had fainted.

*How did I get into this?* he pleaded with himself. *Dear God, I swear if you get me out of this alive I'll never never never go mad like this again. Please God.*

Then the Merc was up on him again, pulling up *alongside!*

The window went down on the passenger side of the Mercury, and George whipped a glance across to see Billy with his lips skinned back from his teeth under the windblast and acceleration, aiming a .45 at him. Barely thinking, George studded the bumpers.

The super-conducting magnetic bumpers took hold, sucked Billy into his magnetic field, and they collided with a crash that shook the .45 out of the rodder's hand. In the instant of collision, George realized he had made his chance, and dropped back. In a moment he was riding the Merc's tail again.

Naked barbarism took hold. He wanted to kill now. Not crash the other, not wound the other, not stop the other—*kill the other!* Messages to God were forgotten.

He locked-in the laser and aimed for the windshield bubble. His sights caught the rear of the bubble, fastened to the outline of Billy's head, and George fired.

As the bolt of light struck the bubble, a black spot appeared, and remained for the seconds the laser touched. When the light cut off the black spot vanished. George cursed, screamed, cried, in fear and helplessness.

The Merc was equipped with a frequency-sensitive laserproof windshield. Chemicals in the windshield would “go black,” opaque at certain frequencies, momentarily, anywhere a laser light touched them. He should have known. A duelist like this Billy, trained in weaponry, equipped for whatever might chance down a Freeway. Another coded optional. George found he was crying, piteously, within the cavern of his bangup hat.

Then the Merc was swerving again, executing a roll and dip that George could not understand, could not predict. Then the Merc dropped speed suddenly, and George found himself almost running up the jet nozzle of the blood-red vehicle.

He spun out and around, and Billy was behind him once more, closing in for the kill. He sent the propellers to full spin and reached for eternity. 270. 280. 290.

Then he heard the sizzling, and jerked his head around to see the back wall of the car rippling. *Oh my God*, he thought, in terror, *he can't afford a laser, but he's got an inductor beam!*

The beam was setting up strong local eddy currents in the beryllium hide of the Chevy. He'd rip a hole in the skin, the air would whip through, the car would go out of control.

George knew he was dead.

And Jessica.

And all because of this punk, this rodder fuzzface!

The Merc closed in confidently.

George thought wildly. There was no time for anything but the blind plunging panic of random thought. The speedometer and the tach agreed. They were doing 300 mph.

Riding on air-cushions.

The thought slipped through his panic.

It was the only possibility. He ripped off his bangup hat, and fumbled Jessica's loose. He hugged them in his lap with his free hand, and managed to stud down the window on the driver's side. Instantly, a blast of wind and accelerated air skinned back his lips, plastered his cheeks hollowly, made a death's head of Jessica's features. He fought to keep the Chevy stable, gyro'd.

Then, holding the bangup hats by their straps, he forced them around the edge of the window where the force of his speed jammed them against the side of the Chevy. Then he let go. And studded up the window. And braked sharply.

The bulky bangup hats dropped away, hit the roadbed, rolled directly into the path of the Merc. They disappeared underneath the blood-red car, and instantly the vehicle hit the Freeway. George swerved out of the way, dropping speed quickly.

The Merc hit with a crash, bounced, hit again, bounced and hit, bounced and hit. As it went past the Piranha, George saw Billy caroming off the insides of the car.

He watched the vehicle skid, wheelless, for a quarter of a mile down the Freeway before it caught the inner breakwall of the Jersey Barrier, shot high in the air, and came down turning over. It landed on the bubble, which burst, and exploded in a flash of fire and smoke that rocked the Chevy.

At three hundred miles per hour, two inches above the Freeway, riding on air, anything that broke up the air bubble would be a lethal weapon. He had won the duel. That Billy was dead.

George pulled in at the next getty, and sat in the lot. Jessica came around finally. He was slumped over the wheel, shaking, unable to speak.

She looked over at him, then reached out a trembling hand to touch his shoulder. He jumped at the infinitesimal pressure, felt through the g- and crash-suits. She started to speak, but the peek queeped, and she studded it on.

"Sector Control, sir." The fusco smiled.

He did not look up.

"Congratulations, sir. Despite one possible infraction, your duel has been logged as legal and binding. You'll be pleased to know that the occupant of the car you challenged was rated number one in the entire Central and Western Freeway circuits. Now that Mr. Bonney has been finalized, we are entering your name on the dueling records. Underwriters have asked us to inform you that a check will be in the mails to you within twenty-four hours.

"Again, sir, congratulations."

The peek went dead, and George tried to focus on the parking lot of the neon-and-silver getty. It had been a terrible experience. He never wanted to use a car that way again. It had been some other George, certainly not him.

"I'm a family man," he repeated Jessica's words. "And this is just a family car...I..."

She was smiling gently at him. Then they were in each other's arms, and he was crying, and she was saying that's all right, George, you had to do it, it's all right.

And the peek queeped.

She studded it on and the face of the fusco smiled back at her. "Congratulations, sir, you'll be pleased to know that Sector Control already has fifteen duel challenges for you.

"Mr. Ronnie Lee Hauptman of Dallas has asked for first challenge, and is, at this moment, speeding toward you with an ETA of 6:15 this evening. In the event Mr. Hauptman does not survive, you have waiting challenges from Mr. Fred Bull of Chatsworth, California...Mr. Leo Fowler of Philadelphia...Mr. Emil Zalenko of..."

George did not hear the list. He was trying desperately, with clubbed fingers, to extricate himself from the strangling folds of g- and crash-suits. But he knew it was no good. He would have to fight.

In the world of the Freeway, there was no place for a walking man.

—Clarion State College, Clarion,  
Pennsylvania, 1968 and Los Angeles,  
1969

*The Author wishes to thank Mr. Ben Bova, formerly of the Avco Everett*

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## PHOENIX

I buried Tab in a shallow grave beneath the shifting red sands. It wasn't deep enough to keep the hysterical night beasts from finding his corpse and tearing it to the bones, but it made me feel better. At first I couldn't face Marga and her swine husband, but when it came time to move on, I had to redistribute the packs—loading as much of what Tab had been carrying as we could into our three rucksacks—and the first glances of their naked hatred were easy to handle. But ten more miles of trekking across that devil underfoot, that stinking blood desert, dissipated some of their vigor; they knew, as I knew...we had to hang together. It was the only way to get out alive.

The sun hung above us like a great eye, punched by a sharp flaming stick...a bloody, dripping eye that turned the stinking desert red around us. Illogically, I wanted a good cup of coffee.

Water. I wanted water, too. And lemonade. With ice all the way up to the top of the glass. Ice cream. Maybe on a stick. I shook my head... I was buzzing.

Red sands. It was a painting we were dragging across, not a reality. Sand was yellow ocher; sand was brown; sand was gray; it wasn't red. Unless you poke the sun in the eye and let it bleed all over the earth. I wished I was back at the University. There was a water cooler just down the hall from my office. I missed that water cooler. I could remember it clearly. The aluminum cool of it, the step-pedal and the arc of water. Oh, God, I couldn't think of anything but the squat beautiful water cooler.

What the hell was I doing out here!

Looking for a legend.

A legend that had already cost me every cent I'd ever saved, every coin I'd ever squirreled up in an account for emergency. This wasn't an emergency—it was stark staring lunacy. An insanity that had taken the life of my friend, my partner...Tab...gone...heat stroke, gasping, tearing at himself, eyes bulging, tongue protruding, the face turning black and the blood vessels spasming in his temples...I tried not to think about it, and could think of nothing else. His face, stretched back in a death rictus, was all I could see, wavering before me in the air, like heat-devils on the endless horizon, that face just an instant before I spilled red sand over it. And left him for whatever unclean

creatures could live on this desert.

“Are we going to stop?”

I turned to look back at Marga’s husband. He had a name, but I kept forgetting it. I *wanted* to keep forgetting it. He was a stupid, weak bastard, with long straight hair that picked up all the moisture from his scalp, and dripped it in oily drops down the back of his neck. He brushed the hair straight back from his receding hairline and it hung like a sleek mat, curling around his ears. His name was Curt, or Clark, or something. I didn’t really *want* to know. I didn’t really *want* to picture him on top of her in a cool white bed somewhere, with an air conditioner humming, their bodies soldered together by passion. I didn’t want to know this sonofabitch, but he was there, lagging half a dozen paces behind me. Bent almost double by the rucksack.

“We’ll stop soon,” I said, and kept moving.

*It should have been you, you bastard, not Tab!*

In the lee of an improbable rock outcropping, in the middle of the nowhere freezing nothing, we set up the little chemical stove, and Marga cooked us an evening meal. Meat, tasteless, pre-packaged, a bad commercial choice for an expedition like this—another example of her swine husband’s ineptitude. I chewed it and chewed it, and wanted to cram it in his ear. Some kind of pudding. The last of the water. I waited for the swine to offer a suggestion that we should boil out our own urine. I waited, but he didn’t know that little fact, fortunately for him.

“What are we going to do tomorrow?” he whined.

I didn’t answer him.

“Eat your food, Grant,” Marga said, not looking up. She knew I was getting pushed to an extreme none of us would like. Why the hell didn’t she tell him we’d known each other before? Why didn’t she say something to break the back of all that silence? How much longer could this deranged charade go on?

“No, I want to *know!*” the swine demanded. He sounded like a petulant child. “It was *you* that got us into this! Now you’ve got to get us out of it!”

I ignored him. The pudding tasted like butterscotch mortar paste.

The bastard heaved his empty pudding tin at me.

“Answer me!”

I went for him. Right across the stove, and down on top of him with my knee in his throat. “Listen, baby boy,” I didn’t recognize my



own voice, “stop clanging on my ears. I’ve had enough of you. Had enough the first day out. If we come back from this up to our asses in money, you’ll tell everyone it was you that did it. If we bust out or die here, you’ll blame me. So now we know what choices you’ve got, and don’t let me hear any mouth about it. Just lay there, or eat your pudding, or *die*, you egg-eyed cockroach, but don’t *demand*, or I’ll stave in your windpipe!”

I’m not sure he understood a word of what I said. I was almost frothing, crazy with hate and heat, slurring my words. He was starting to black out.

Marga pulled me off him.

I slunk back to my place and stared off at the stars. There weren’t any. It wasn’t that kind of night.

Hours later, she slid over to my side. I wasn’t sleeping, despite the bone-cold and the need to be under a thermal blanket in my sleeping bag. I *wanted* to be cold: to freeze my hatred, to chill my self-loathing, to drop the temperature on the killing rage building within me. She sat there a moment, staring down at me, trying to ascertain in the dark if I had my eyes open. I opened them and said, “What do you want?”

“I want to talk to you, Red.”

“About what?”

“About tomorrow.”

“Nothing to talk. Either we make it or we don’t.”

“He’s frightened. You have to allow him—”

“Nothing. I have to allow him not a thing. The way I read it, I’ve allowed him just about everything I can already. Don’t expect a nobility out of me that your own husband doesn’t possess. I wasn’t that well brought-up.”

She bit her lower lip. She was in pain, I knew it, I’d have given anything to reach out and touch her hair, it might have helped, I didn’t do it. “He’d gone wrong so many times, Red. So many business deals that just went wrong in his hands. He thought this might be his chance. His last main chance. You’ve got to understand...”

I sat up. “Lady, I was like a slave at a galley oar. You know that, don’t you? You know you had me by the ears. All tight, all wrapped up. But I wasn’t high enough up in the sanctified holy order for you, was I? I didn’t wear the purple robe of position! I was a working stiff, a professor...a nice guy to roll around with when there wasn’t anything at stake. But along came the swine with the golden tooth—”

“Red, stop it!”

“Stop it, sure. Anything you say.” I flopped down and rolled over, my back to her, my face toward the rock. She didn’t move for a long time. I thought she might have fallen asleep. I wanted to reach her, somehow, but I knew I’d slammed whatever doors there ever were between us. Finally, she tried again, in a softer voice.

“Red, is it going to be all right?”

I rolled over and stared up at her. There wasn’t enough light to see her features. It was easier to be civil to a silhouette. “I don’t know. If your husband hadn’t shorted us on supplies—that was all I asked of him for a one-third share, recall...just supplies—if he hadn’t shorted us, Tab wouldn’t have died, and we’d have a better chance. He was the one knew best how to follow the magnetic grid. I can do it, but it was *his* invention, he knew the fine working, down to the last quarter mile. If we’re lucky, if we’re close enough *now* so any course errors I make don’t carry us off at an extreme angle, we might still blunder into it. Or maybe there’ll be another tremor. Or maybe we’ll hit an oasis. I wouldn’t bet on any of them. It’s all in the hands of the gods. Pick a half a dozen, use the stove for an altar, and start worshipping now. Maybe by morning we’ll have amassed enough good will from on high to pull us through.”

She went away from me, then. I lay there, thinking of nothing in particular. When she lay down beside him, he whimpered and turned to her in his sleep. Like a child, I wanted to cry. But it wasn’t that kind of night, either.

All the legends of the lost continent I’d ever heard, ever since I’d been a child. All of them, about golden cities and the incredible people who moved there, and the staggering science lost to us forever when the continent had sunk and the sea had claimed it. I’d been fascinated, as any child is fascinated by the strange, the unknown, the magical. No one ever loses that. And as I’d pursued a career in archeology, the tantalizing clues, the constant references. Finally, finding the theory that perhaps what had been a sea in that dim and wondrous past was now a desert. The dead sands merely the bottom of a long-sunk ocean.

Tab had been the first real link with the dream. He had been a loner, even at the University. Though he had tenure, he’d been considered something of a dreamer; a good enough man in his field, but always postulating some insane fantasy theory about time-warp fields and the past never dying. We had become friends. Nothing so strange. He needed someone...I needed someone. It is possible for men to feel love for one another, and nothing sexual in it. Perhaps there was more than that. He was my friend. I never probed it more deeply

than that.

And finally Tab had shown me his device. His temporal seismograph. His theory was wild, constructed on mathematics and lofty logic that I never found even suggested by any of the standard texts. He said time had weight. That the heaviness of centuries could permeate both living matter and dead rock. That when time evaporated—chronoleakage, he called it—even something as immense as a continent would rise. It explained, in a crazy way I could never have explained to my dust-encrusted pedantic contemporaries, the continual re-formation of the face of the earth. I suggested perhaps we could find the source of the legends, that perhaps...

Tab had laughed, clapped his hands like a small boy, and we'd started work on the project. Finally, it had all begun to fall into place. There were seismic tremors logged in desert areas I'd already selected as potentialities.

We'd finally been convinced: it was happening.

The lost continent was at last rising.

We'd known we needed financing. It had been not only unavailable to us...it had been considered a mad scheme by two madmen...and our careers had been thrown into jeopardy. Finally, the swine husband had come forward. He'd sounded like a man with the golden touch of success. I hadn't known to whom he was married. We'd made our deal. We would supply the science, the expertise, the search party. He would finance. And when we had left for the dig locale, he had sprung her on me.

For Tab, I couldn't back out. Now Tab was dead, and I was out on the edge of lingering death with the two people I hated most in the world.

That day's walk of fire was no worse than the day before. It was bad enough.

Just after mid-day, the beasts set upon us.

We were entering the area of strongest tremors, according to the magnetic grid. I knew I could be as much as three hundred miles off, but the readings were strong. I was paying close attention to Tab's machine—that tiny and magnificent little device he'd wasted his life to bring to reality—when Marga called my attention to the black dots on the horizon. We stopped and watched as they grew slowly larger. After a time we were able to make out that it was a pack of... *something*.

Then, still later, with a growing fear, we were able to make out individual shapes. I was at once terrified and elated. Whatever they

were, they weren't any kind of creature I'd ever known to exist on the face of the earth, at least not in civilized times. They came loping toward us, flat-out at an incredible speed. And when they were close enough for us to see finally what they *were*...Marga began screaming with a naked and deranged horror that I could not fault. They made the flesh on my neck prickle. Her husband tried to run, but there was nowhere to run. We were trapped in the open. Then they set upon us, and began tearing flesh.

I used the collapsible shovel, locking it at its full length, swinging it around me in an arc that caught one of the filthy things and almost severed its ugly, misshapen head from its neck. Spittle and blood and bits of fur coated me. I was blind with terror, and the sound of their dog-voices in my ears blotted out everything but the shrieking of Marga as they tore her apart.

Finally, somehow, I drove them off. Stinking corpses littered the sand around me like garbage, some of the dog-things still heaving their slashed breasts with pumped blood breathing. I went around and killed the last ones hanging on.

Then I found her. She was not quite dead. She had barely enough left in her to ask me to take care of him...her husband. She went away from me for the last time.

We went on, her man and myself. We went on, and I don't know that I thought a coherent thought from that moment on. But we went on. The next day, we found it.

It rose up out of the scarlet sands. Six months before, we might have passed directly over its towers and domes, and never known that beneath our boots the lost continent of mythology was rising steadily toward the light. Six months from now, its streets and lowest recesses might be totally free of the whirling sands. It had risen like a bubble through water.

Ruined, destroyed, shattered, a great and silent testimony to a race that had been here before us, that had played whatever inevitable drama those magic men had devised, only to end its days in dust and oblivion. I understood what had happened to the dog-beasts. It had not been natural disaster that had ended the life of the wonder city, the magic continent on which we now stood. There were unmistakable signs of a war. Our radioactivity detector was clicking furiously. I could not even laugh wryly at their stupidity. The sight of such grandeur, cast aside so senselessly, made my throat tighten. Yes, time was circular. Men repeated their mistakes.

Her husband stared, awe and a kind of illiterate wonder in his

coarse face. "Water!" he mumbled urgently. "Water!"

He started running toward the city.

I called to him. I called. Softly. Let him go. Let him run toward whatever dream castles he thought might offer him sanctuary. I watched him go, and followed slowly.

It might have been the radiation that killed him, or the pockets of poison gas from under the earth that surely still pulsed there in the dead streets of the magic city. When I finally managed to track a path into the city, using my radiation detector to avoid the areas of densest radioactivity, I found him. Bloated, blackened, swollen in the last rigors of a death that could not have been awful enough to satiate my need to see him twisted on the rack of his last moments.

I took a few unarguable bits of proof; relics, artifacts, devices unknown to any of the gray, wise heads at all the universities. I started back. I would make it. I knew I would make it. I was alone. I had things that would keep me moving. For Tab, for her...even for him. I would get back to Atlantis, and tell them that time was, indeed, circular. That New York City had risen.

—Clarion State College, Clarion, Pennsylvania, 1968

## ASLEEP: WITH STILL HANDS

Beneath the Sargasso Sea: the Sleeper.

Waiting for their mutual tomorrow: Leaf and Laurrayne.

Peace, on Earth. So much peace.

And Abbott, going to kill six hundred years.

Leaf's Force, opaqued and committed to slaughter, raced for the chart coordinates where the Sleeper had been planted, six hundred years before. Inside the assault vehicle—restored from its display case in the Smithsonian—Abbott turned suddenly, as the sound of the tracker alarms went off on the plot-board. For a fleeting instant he saw his face washing across the polished bulkhead, blurred by his movement, but nonetheless *him*: chocolate brown, bright eyes, freckles, a particular kind of nose.

"Lock in!" he ordered the 1st Lieutenant.

The 1st Lieutenant palmed three huge buttons on the plot-board, the scanner screen shifted intensities, and out of the sea-murk and slime-fog of the Sargasso appeared the coalescing image of an outdated but powerful seaskimmer, bearing down on them.

"Reading!" Abbott demanded.

"Course coordinate to sweep our bow."

"What kind of time?"

"Minute and a half...maybe."

Abbott slammed the chart rack with his hand. For the first time since they had slipped out of what had been the Pensacola Sub Pens, he was furious with anger, furious with the possibility that they might not make it, might not get to the Sleeper first, might not turn him off first, might lose the opening jump of the war to Laurrayne's Force.

He turned back to the six men in the vehicle. "First stays on scanner; the rest of you link up with me."

The Commander of Leaf's Force dropped into a gelatin-trough and closed his eyes. The other five team-members did the same, adjusting their seats to trough, and sliding back down into the enclosing yellow-green substance.

Immediately, Abbott felt his mind being touched by the five. He lined them in behind his own focus, and held the force in readiness as he probed softly, sweetly, toward the seaskimmer and Laurrayne's Force. When he had dwindled the probe to a stress-point, he left the

probe and traced back along its length to his focus. Then, with the power of the five men, he hurled himself down the probe, crackling, rushing, invisibly striking the stress-point.

The stress-point was in the mind of one of Laurrayne's men, and as the mental force-beam struck, instantly charring out the man's skull, burning out the eyes, Laurrayne's Commander slammed down his own mental barrier and expanded it to enclose his men. It was barely in time to save them.

The burned-out corpse still stood erect, the empty black eyesockets flashing power that ripped and crackled through the seaskimmer. The force-beam of Abbott's mind, powered to the fifth, leaped and burned from the face of the dead man. The corpse jerked with the power it contained, and the arms flapped wide and without volition, the legs rubbered and twisted as the head tossed loosely on its neck, spume of deadly power emanating from the eyes, burning, charring.

Safe within the mind barrier erected by their Force Leader, Laurrayne's men stared in horror at what had become of their companion. Laurrayne's Force Leader turned away, and then swallowed hard. He spoke to his men with difficulty. "Link up with me, we'll stop it."

There were eight left alive in the seaskimmer. They joined minds, and short-circuited the force-beam. The empty husk of the corpse dropped instantly. The stench of corrupt flesh was high in the seaskimmer. One of the men gagged. "*Tense in there!*" the Leader snapped, and full intensity from the man's mind was sent resurging into the common pool.

The Leader tried to track back down the path of the force-beam focus, but Abbott had already mazed it, and somewhere out over the sea the stalking evaporated.

Laurrayne's Force now had the task of rectifying their course. The dead man had burned out whole banks of controls. The seaskimmer was plunging wildly out of control, deeper into the Sargasso Sea.

While they tried to bring themselves back to optimum efficiency, hoping to regain time, Abbott was urging his team toward the coordinates where the Sleeper had been sent down, so long before.

Abbott unlinked and spoke his orders smoothly, softly, urging his team back to their positions. The troughs were re-chaired and the team-members took their places. Abbott watched. They were moving sluggishly, reluctantly.

He continued watching.

"Okay, what is it?"

They turned and stared at him. No one spoke. "Open up. Let me in." They shied from his stare, but one by one opened their minds to

his probe. He went in, touched lingeringly for an instant, then withdrew. He saw what was in their minds.

"I know. But we have to do it."

They didn't react.

"Don't let it slow us down. Keep alert." He went back into each of their minds and smoothed the places where their horror lay: horror at what they had seen their mental power do to the Laurrayne team-member. Smoothed, their efficiency rose and they went at their controls, sending the vehicle deeper into the fog-shrouded Sargasso, seeking the place of the Sleeper.

Abbott blanked himself off, and thought about it. Leaf had found him leading group therapy classes at Klock Institute; sessions filled with men and women bored with their existences, surfeited with ennui and longing for answers that would not be the same as the one they had all invariably found: suicide.

Leaf had come to him and had opaqued Abbott's thoughts so the Sleeper could no longer monitor him. And then he had told him about war. About the value of war. The necessity of war, to make man Man again. And Abbott had listened, had cleaved to Leaf's philosophy, because he had been exposed to the consequences of continued peace. But he had had the feeling that had he not agreed with Leaf, had he not decided to head up Leaf's assault force, the man would have killed Abbott on the spot.

Now...where was he? What was he doing?

Did he believe it, still...? Now that they had actually made contact, had actually burned out a man's head, had actually used him as an instrument of death. Did he still think of Leaf and Laurrayne as saviors of mankind...or were they precisely what the Sleeper had been created to prevent.

He didn't know. Now. And he wanted to know, needed to know. Desperately.

The vehicle, with a boring mole locked in its belly, moved deeper into the seaweed-clogged vastness of the Sargasso.

Beneath the Sea, the Sleeper waited, having no way of knowing that his time was nearing its end, that men were coming to turn him off, that once again war would walk the world.

And Abbott, the instrument of their destiny, needed to know.

In the world, before Laurrayne and Leaf, it had been different. It was not that much changed, yet, but if the Force reached the Sleeper...

Before they had come, it had been different:



Only two men knew the secret of making thoughts opaque. The first was Pieter Kalder, the man who had serendipitously stumbled on the technique. He was an old man, almost bald, who had bitten his nails since childhood, refining the process to such an elegance that now he worked only at the corners of his fingernails, closest to the quick. The other was his assistant, a teddy bear of a man, short and round with a nervous habit of nodding continuously through someone else's question as though proving attentiveness all along the way.

He never considered himself a happy man.

But then, neither did Kalder.

But the teddy bear had found a measure of meaning in working with the brilliant Kalder. The teddy bear's name was Albert Ophir, and he contributed the refraction mathematics to the technique. Their method had been in existence for seventeen years before the right parties happened upon them. By that time Kalder and Ophir were in other places than where they had been, and they were doing other things.

No one had cared what they had found. Because it had not mattered; after a while, even to them.

Because at that time there had been peace in the world for six hundred years.

And for six hundred years there had been no progress.

Then, by chance, one of the right parties stumbled on the technique, or more precisely, the records of the technique. Before he could tie down his lines of communication, the other right party learned of what had been found.

The first of the right parties, after six hundred years, and after seventeen years, was a man named Laurrayne. He was huge through the shoulders, bearlike in his love, with an enormous appetite. He thrived on life and the living of it.

The other right party was a thoughtful, skintight man named Leaf who wrote poetry and sang in a sweet, distant voice. He was well on in years and had refused the youth restoratives, feeling—perhaps properly—that a man should reconcile himself to growing old gracefully, without trying to avoid the inevitable.

These men were the right parties to take note of the technique for making thoughts opaque because these men were (though not the first in six hundred years) fired with the desire to start war on Earth again. To begin the holocaust of random slaying and senseless theft of what belonged to other nations and parties. To recommence global hostilities that would plunge every man into his personal hell of fear and distrust.

Which had been impossible for six hundred years while the Sleeper

sat with still hands and closed eyes in his cavern of steel beneath the Sargasso Sea, monitoring the thoughts of the world, keeping the peace.

Laurrayne and Leaf chose to be enemies.

For how else could war be effected if there were no combatants, no opposite sides, no antagonists?

And they sought out Kalder and Ophir.

For how else could Man begin to resume his climb of Progress to his Destiny, if there were no wars to spur creativity and challenge his abilities? If the monitoring of the Sleeper could not be ended so that Man might once again bash the brains of other men, and think his thoughts of tomorrow, dream his dreams of the stars?

They were right parties to choose up sides, and to seek out the formulators of the technique, because they so believed what needed to be done was a holy chore, that they were able to dismiss the thoughts of Kalder and Ophir from their minds before the sweep of the Sleeper's monitor could pin it in their heads. They were perhaps lucky, but then perhaps they were destined, for they cleared their minds and when the Sleeper's monitor touched them they were pink and clean and fresh as the souls of newborn infants—of which there were a regulated number each year.

Right, because they were able to seek out Kalder and Ophir, one to each, without having to harbor the thoughts of why they were doing what they were doing.

And when Laurrayne found Kalder, in Vienna, he was able to put the technique into instant use, making his own thoughts opaque; thereby putting him beyond the retaliatory powers of the Sleeper. Even as Leaf had done, only days before, when he had located Ophir in Greenland, and had obtained the secret from him.

After which, each man killed his informant with dispatch and an absolute minimum of pain. Of course.

After which, each set about opaqueing the thoughts of a carefully selected force of men; men who would form the nuclei of armies that would eventually lock in mortal combat, once again sending the glorious sound of death across the land.

But first, before Man's Destiny could be fulfilled, the Sleeper had to be shut off, had to be silenced in his silent task, six hundred years on the job. Laurrayne and Leaf chose their men carefully, and using the charts to be found in certain places, sent their special forces out to locate the Sleeper beneath the Sargasso. To end his eternal life, and close down his prying mind.

And all of it while the Sleeper watched; closed eyes and silent, with still hands beneath the Sargasso.

Abbott was dreaming. A dream from another life, drawn up through the quicksand of his unconscious, some reincarnated otherlife worn within another body. He had consciously sought this dream, had ordered it up on the instant, to examine it and with it help himself examine what he was doing now, in this time, in this place.

It was a dream of war.

Learned and remembered through the memory of his flesh that had been another man's flesh, impregnated with how-it-was before the flesh had been assigned to him. He was remembering the past, and how it had been with war.

The dream began with pithecanthropoids and their clubs, their first thrown stones. The dream progressed through bow and arrow, through sword and mace and quarterstaff; the dream was of arbalest and great thundering catapults. The dream was of blowguns and flintlock rifles, of grenades and bayonets, of tanks and triplanes, of jets and atomic bombs and napalm, of heat-seeking missiles and bacteria. Then the dream faltered, as the flesh remembered the fourth world war, and what it was like after that fourth, and how they had not learned, even then. He dreamed...

He was ambushed by a garbage-reeking roverpak of Yahoos as he maneuvered the Healy between the shellholes on Fountain Avenue, just past Vine. Bartok had passed around the rumor there were cans of New England clam chowder and anchovy paste still intact amid the ruins of the Hollywood Ranch Market. Of course, he had been lying; no such thing. But he *had* found a jar of Beluga caviar. It had been kicked under a pile of lath and plaster, the label almost entirely ripped away. He had recognized it instantly and slipped it into his tucker-bag along with several charred magazines: a perfectly readable issue of *McCall's*, half a *Popular Science*, and a one-shot someone had published on The Beatles, shortly before the war. He could only vaguely recall ever having heard The Beatles, but the magazine was good for a few laughs, which in itself made the item worth at least a pint of canned blackberries. Other than these, the store had been empty. Gutted and ransacked a hundred times over. The stink of ambushed looters had forced him to tie a bandanna across his lower face.

The engine of the Healy had been missing badly for close to a week—since the attack on the Hollywood Bowl—and Leonardo da Vinci was away on a fresh-meat forage somewhere in Topanga Canyon, so he would have to wait for the mechanic's return for the necessary repairs. It was the snapping and popping of the exhaust as he tooled out of the Ranch Market, that had awakened the roverpak.

They swarmed out into the street as he sped slalom-style up Fountain, avoiding the shellholes with practiced skill. As he first saw

them, his immediate instinct was to deck the accelerator and drive straight through them. But he had tried that once...and the damage to the Healy had been close to unrepairable. It had taken a forage as far southwest as Anaheim to locate a windscreen for the little four-banger. And a can of British racing green was almost non-existent by this time.

So he killed them, instead.

He pulled the oilskin cover off the brace-mounted Thompson, threw off the safety, and sprayed the street. The gimbals—at best jerry-rigged conveniences added by Sgt. York when the mountings were already in work—squeaked and jerked, but held. He knocked out half a dozen with the first bursts, and the rest scattered for cover. He took one huge, grizzled Yahoo (obviously the bastard had been eating long pig, it showed in the face, it always did when they turned ghoul) on the fly, as he dove for a ditch; the ghoul did an intricate one-and-a-half gainer before he hit, split, and lay twitching. Two more ran flat-out in front of him, failing to see the crater yawning before them, and as they dropped, and he sped past, he caught a glimpse of the deadly green bacterial mist that still hung in a wispy pool at the bottom; the two Yahoos would not be coming back up from the crater. Then he was through them, and the angry hornet pinging of their small arms fire was behind him. He whistled the Jazztet changes on Tadd Dameron's "Hi-Fly" all the way back to the Capitol Tower; and later that week he helped Thomas Jefferson and Henry David Thoreau chart out a new World Peace Constitution...

Abbott dreamed on.

Memories from six hundred years of history books. The history of man and his wars.

Another dream, long after the first had melded into peace, and another war, and another peace, and then an answer that had come to mankind when it seemed his last hope was gone. The Sleeper...

"Abbott!"

Leaf's Force Leader came up from his reveries of war and peace, to see his six crew-members staring at him.

"You were talking in your sleep."

He swallowed and nodded. They went back to their controls. The vehicle was moving more slowly now. He rose from the gelatin-trough and checked the plot-board. Ten minutes. They would cross the coordinates in ten minutes.

"First, stay on point. You, you, and you, come with me." He moved out of the control section, entered the dropshaft and allowed himself to be drawn down to the storage level. Behind him, the three team-members drifted smoothly down.

By the time they had settled, Abbott had dilated the hatch into the chamber where the mole was dogged to the deckplates. It was as large as the entire seaskimmer Laurrayne's Force had employed, tractor-treaded and auger-nosed. It loomed there in the semi-darkness of the unused storage chamber, its twin head-beams dark (Abbott had a swift flash of the dead, burned-out eyes of the man they had killed). Like a great metal insect, some silvered potato bug grown immense.

He palmed the lights brighter in the chamber, and ordered the three team-members up the side of the mole, and into the conning hatch.

Then he followed. When they were all securely snugged into their pressure suits and strapped into the formfits, Abbott hooked up with the First. "Give me a reading."

The returned thought, from the mind of the 1st Lieutenant, was like the thin, reedy wind that blows through the lofts of cathedrals. "I make it six minutes. Do you want the bays opened now?"

Abbott decided not. "Hold them closed till we're directly over the coordinates, then release from your board. Keep linked up with me through the operation."

He received acknowledgment, and settled back. It was six minutes dead time. He linked with the three men in the mole and prescribed six minutes sleep. They fell instantly down through the layers of readiness and were fully, deeply asleep. Abbott plunged after them, having set his consciousness to awaken him in five minutes, twenty-eight seconds.

They would need to remain awake for the full time of the operation; this respite now would serve to freshen them. But it did nothing to freshen Abbott. The dreams of his reincarnated flesh began again, picking up where they had left off...

Dreams of war, and the peace that always followed. There had been a fifth war, and a sixth, and somehow the antagonists always seemed to pull back just at the very edge of total extinction. And then they tried another way: personal combat. Save the nations of fine young men. Send out the heads of state. If the men at the top had to do their own slaying, perhaps war would become a trifle less attractive to them, the fat killers of children...Abbott's flesh remembered:

When the President of All-Americas came into the arena, he was greeted with a rising tide of catcalls, boos and murderous hisses. He dragged his spiked net through the dust behind him, and ignored the hail of freezi-hot tins being hurled from the groundling bleachers.

He walked about aimlessly, waiting for his opponent to emerge from the ready-tank at the opposite end of the packed-earth arena. He

looked up into the sky. It was a chill day, a hell of a day for a summit meeting. The brinksmanship pennons were all whipping sharply in a brisk breeze from the...he cocked his head and estimated...east end of the arena. He looked toward the ready-tank again, but Dmitri Gregorovich Potamkin, Chairman of the Communist Republic, Khan of the Freely Liberated Chinese Red Star States, Premier of the Hemisphere of the People's Proletariat Protectorate, was late.

Glenn O. Dawzman, Chief of State of All-A, smiled a secret smile and twitched his steel-mesh net in a gesture of defiance at the smartmoney boxes that had wagered heavily in favor of the Russkichink boss. It was going to be a good day in commodities, steel, luxury shares, and communications. If he won. He thought it likely. He now fully believed the reports his Secretary of State had brought him in the White House that morning, reports fresh from CIA men double-covered at Potamkin's training camp in the Urals. Reports that Potamkin had looked slow, uncoordinated, that the Russkichink was growing faint of heart. It was going to be a smashing victory for Democracy and the American Way of Life today.

Glenn Dawzman knew Heaven was on his side.

A roar went up from the prole sections.

Potamkin lumbered out of the ready-tank, brandishing a short sword and carborundum shield. Dawzman swallowed heavily. He had thoughts of his childhood in Texas. Potamkin looked in fine shape, a great black bear of a man, a thick mat of dark wiry hair covering his chest and belly like fur, all white teeth bared in brutal humor, eyes deep-set beneath shag-brows that made him resemble some sort of *yeti*.

Dawzman revised his theories about the day's forthcoming contest. It might be a stalemate. It might even conceivably be a diplomatic setback. All-A might have to relinquish its claims to the Sudan. It might even be preamble to a huge and stately funeral: GOD DIES IN OFFICE. He read the fax headlines in the sudden blind space behind his eyes, where he had just now this instant suddenly found himself alone with fear and the future...what might be a short future, indeed.

Politics was hell on an older man.

He crouched, and Potamkin came on.

He swirled his net, Potamkin lunged abruptly, the short sword came straight on, and he whipped the net over the blade. Spikes struck blade and sparks flew...

Abbott's flesh was pinged by his consciousness. He came riding up out of sleep and memory, running data on the peace that was not peace, the wars that followed, and ending once again with the Sleeper.

"Okay, everybody up!" His men jumped to the command.

The bays opened. The dogs de-magnetized, and the mole dropped

straight down out of the belly of the larger vehicle.

They were in the Sargasso now, plummeting down through a miasma of seaweed, debris, and absolute utter stygian blackness. He cut on the head-lamps. They shone out into nothingness. "Give me a reading on the bottom."

One of his team-members consulted a dial. "Coming up fast... 300...360...410...480...500..."

And then Abbott screamed. The linkage with his 1st Lieutenant had suddenly blown in a corona of heat and pain and sudden silence. "Laurrayne's Force just blasted the vehicle," he told them. He did not pass along his sensory impressions of that last instant of life the First had known, as Laurrayne's Force Leader had swept him with destruction.

They were on their own now, and above them somewhere the other Force was dropping down to intercept.

Abbott felt gratitude as they struck bottom.

*Oh my god, what am I doing?* he thought.

The team-member at the chart board said they were directly over the coordinates. "Should I begin a shaft?" Abbott nodded, realizing he was losing control of his operation, that these men sensed surely that his mind was in a turmoil.

The chart board man made a hole in the air with his forefinger and the boring engineer caught it. He tapped out inclining instructions on the control panel. The mole rose up on its base, tilted its body forward, and the machine began to move forward as the engineer threw home the switch that started the screw-bit nose turning slowly. It made very little noise.

"Sandhog," Abbott called the engineer, "give me a fifty degree shaft for six miles, then increase to full ninety, got it?"

The sandhog okayed, and they moved forward. The screw nose touched silt, spewed it out on both sides of the mole, and bit deeper. It began whining. The black mud flew up and back in fan-wedges, and the mole began to descend on tractor-treads down the track of the shaft it was boring for itself.

Abbott could no longer restrain the thought; he opaqued it from his crew, but he dealt with it now, finally: beneath him, hundreds of miles down, somewhere in the silent stone center of his world, a man sat asleep, silently reading the thoughts of all men, keeping them from that endless pastime war. Abbott now knew he would make it... Laurrayne's Force notwithstanding. He felt the certainty in him. Even if it was ego-delusion, still he had to react to it. (If Laurrayne's Force destroyed him before he got to the Sleeper, it wouldn't matter, it would all be ended. But there was only one other possibility: he *would*

make it. And he had to think about that.)

He had, finally, to think about the Sleeper.

Down there.

The Sleeper had been a man. No one now remembered his name, it didn't matter. But his name had been Blanos. Paul Vevery Blanos. He had been a theologian. A philosopher. He had worked in the name of rationality, sanity, all the days of his life.

He had been the original architect of the Pacem In Terris Congress in Basel which had led inevitably to The World Council. He had written volumes on the joy and logic of peace; his nine-volume history of war took thirty years of research and analysis to write; and when the ninth and final volume was published, it was the final word on the subject. From that moment onward, anyone who ever cared to speak of war or peace had to refer to Blanos.

What few knew—even the heads of state who called him friend—was that Paul Blanos was one of a group known only to each other as Eleven Concerned. Blanos and ten other good men, captains of industry, world-famous philanthropists, personalities, founders of dynasties and founders of trusts in the name of the advancement of Man. Between them, in their not insubstantial ways, they had staved off innumerable conflicts, merely by the pressure of their wealth, power and sensibleness.

When Blanos's helicopter was sabotaged by a fanatic of the newly-revived *thuggee* cult, it was the Eleven Concerned who moved with quicksilver speed to save him.

The body and the brain were dead.

There was no medical room for discussion. Dead.

The Eleven Concerned had ways, however.

They carried off the remains of Blanos, and they hooked those remains into a machine. Blanos lived. No, not really. Blanos dreamed. He could not be brought fully back to life, but he could be brought to that intermediate stage so dreamlike in its nature.

Eleven Concerned secreted what had been the glory of Blanos in a shockproof underground chamber, and there Blanos continued his work. Eleven Concerned released it through the next twenty years as posthumous findings from the seemingly endless files of the great Blanos. Then they found the machine had altered Blanos.

He was part man, part dreamer, part machine.

He was something new.

Though they had no name for him, though they still called him Blanos, the man who was dead and sleeping in the machine had



become the Sleeper.

He could monitor their thoughts.

He never communicated with them, he sought no two-way thoroughfare of exchange, but he read them. And he tested his own powers. They burgeoned.

Until finally he *did* communicate with them.

He told them what they must do with his body.

Eleven Concerned began the most incredible excavating operation since the Great Pyramid of Cheops. They sank a shaft, and they built a cavern, and they set the Sleeper in his dreamer's chair, down down down in the center of the world, deep under the Sargasso Sea, where no one could reach him. And the Sleeper began the monitoring that would never cease. Eleven Concerned then informed the world that it had a guardian angel, that it was now forbidden to start war, for the Sleeper was there, on duty every waking and sleeping moment of every one of their lives, and the least little thought in their heads about war, or what it took to make a war, or how you got yourself stupidly into a posture that could only be alleviated by war, would result in some tender smoothing in the mind. And the war would be stopped at its first germinating stage.

The world reacted badly.

It tried to start wars.

It got not far at all.

The Eleven were no longer Concerned.

It had been so for six hundred years. Even for the times when *other* Concerneds decided it was necessary to get to the Sleeper, and turn him off. They had been smoothed. And Man had lived in peace for six hundred years, while the Sleeper dreamed his dreams that had their termini in the souls and skulls of men far over his head, walking the world.

Then had come Kalder and Ophir.

And they had begotten the technique.

And the technique had called into focus Leaf and Laurrayne.

Who had sent out Forces. Forces that were now plunging down a shaft in the earth, toward a Sleeper who had no idea they were coming; a Sleeper who still dreamed his Blanos philosophy dreams of the good world, where good men lived a good life.

Coming toward him, Abbott; antichrist, assassin, mechanic of shutdown, stayer of centuries, savior of mankind, dealer in realities, emissary of power, killer of the dream. Force Leader. Going down. Wondering.

Laurrayne's Force caught up with them shortly after Abbott had noted their rate of descent and the angle of the shaft was approaching seventy-five degrees. There was a short, sharp squawk—a chicken being beheaded—and one of the team-members fell over his controls. Smoke poured out of his loosely hanging mouth. Abbott slammed a barrier around them, and instantly felt the cascading power of the Laurrayne Force Leader's mind.

Abbott knew it had to be done here, it had to be ended now, they could not drag it all the way down the shaft to the Sleeper. It had to be settled finally here, in the pit leading to the center of the earth. He ordered the remaining two to link with him. They were only three, against at least half a dozen—maybe more—but he had to do what he could. Now!

Abbott flung himself against the force-beam, struck it, rode with the power of it for an instant, then shifted direction and began racing back up the line toward the Laurrayne Force Leader's mind. So intense was the attack that Abbott was able to gain half the distance back to its focus before the Laurrayne Leader knew he was there, on his way. He snapped up his own barrier.

It was what Abbott had counted on.

He plunged on, struck the barrier and diffused. The barrier became black with the spread of oily thought. The Laurrayne Leader could not think out past it. He was trapped within the fortress of his own protection.

And his Force kept coming, down the shaft.

Abbott waited, pressure-suited, mind elsewhere, in the night-black shaft. When he saw the first light of the Laurrayne attack vehicle, he strung the imploder in its cat's cradle, across the mouth of the shaft. Then he ran back to the mole, a mile down the shaft.

His movements had been controlled by the plot-board in the mole. Movements programmed and predictable as the jerking of a dead frog's leg under an electric shock. His body had been plugged in, and the mole's thinktank had used him, a somnambulist, a zombie, a robot, while his mind still locked in oily dark across the rounded surface of the Laurrayne Leader's barrier.

Back in the mole, Abbott waited.

Too late, the Laurrayne Force Leader realized he had been outmaneuvered. *He* had worked entirely with thought, and Leaf's man had struck instantly back to the basics of what they were all trying to do. War. Personal combat. Hand-to-hand fighting. Not locked in the safety of minds across miles, but right out there, in the dirt, stringing an imploder.

In the instant before the Laurrayne attack vehicle struck the imploder, the Leader ruefully thought, "You win," at his opponent,

and then there was a deafening *absence* of sound from up the shaft, and the force-beam winked out.

Abbott had won. He had understood the nature of war much more clearly than his opponent. He had had the roots of memory upon which to draw for nourishment. He had reincarnated his flesh through dreams and had remembered what it was to do the job by hand.

“Let’s get out of here,” he told his men.

The mole began its burrowing again, and in the vehicle Abbott cried silently.

When they broke through the wall of blue and shining stone, they found themselves in a chamber that seemed not to have been constructed by the hand of a man. The workmanship was beyond anything Abbott had ever seen. When he yanked off his breather mask, he saw his face, brown and tense, clearly reflected in the amazingly beautiful walls. How he knew there would be air here to breathe...he was always to wonder.

The floor was of a green metallic substance that seemed at first to show great depth—as though looking down through seawater—and then extreme shallowness—as though light was buried just beneath the reflective surface. Near the opening they had gouged in the rock wall, a circular platform of the same material, yet somehow denser, more potent, a deeper green, rested not quite on the floor. It was suspended less than an inch above the shallow-depth green of the flooring. On the platform was a chair of intricate design. The most notable thing about the chair, however, were the candles set in heavy golden balls—set at the runic points of a hexagram.

That was notable. And one other thing.

In the chair sat the Sleeper.

Encased in a metal and glass helmet attached to a collar that was too large for the shrunken body—a collar and helmet whose weight no living man could have long supported—the Sleeper sat dead, dreaming. Monitoring. Keeping the peace.

The control console that measured invisible stresses and fluxes seemed as dead as the man...silent and dark. His hands rested heavily on the arms of the chair. He did not move.

Behind him, Abbott and one of the two remaining team-members moved closer. Their pressure-suits seemed now terribly warm in this centuries-sealed cavern. The gigantic boring-nose cone of the mole was silent at last. The standby lights flashed orange. Light flooded out of the cavern, illuminating the pale-blue rock of the shaft they had just dug.

And the Sleeper dreamed.

The keeper of the peace.

The team-member walked slowly forward, amazement in his face. "This is him," he said, softly. The myth was in fact a reality. He started to step up onto the platform, reaching out to touch the robe the Sleeper wore.

The robe that seemed to cover something other than a human body; after six hundred years, what lay beneath that robe was certainly not human, not any longer.

"Get away from there!"

The team-member jerked back at the sudden sound of Abbott's raised voice. He drew back, looking sheepish.

"Get back in the mole. Set up for reverse, we'll be going right back the way we came."

The team-member started back to the hole in the cavern wall, then stopped. Abbott turned to look at him. The man was smiling, his face flushed with something like delight. His eyes were bright. "We did it, dammit! We really did it. This is the starting over, isn't it? This is where we get another chance!"

Abbott felt his throat close. He could not speak. He motioned the man back to the mole with a peremptory gesture.

When he was alone in the chamber, he turned back to the Sleeper. Thoughts of corpses with eyes that spewed death were in his head. Thoughts of rubble-strewn city streets and Yahoos that were animals that had been men. Thoughts of gaping mouths with smoke pouring out. Thoughts of great men standing naked with their fear in arenas that substituted for war. Thoughts of implosions that sucked sound and life from the air. *Oh my god*, he thought, *oh my dear sweet god, tell me*.

But Abbott had taken Leaf for his god, and Leaf had taken allegiance to the god of war. So Abbott was alone. With the Sleeper, who could not monitor him, could not help him by smoothing him. Abbott was where he had wanted to be, functioning as a man again. And he was terribly afraid. Afraid to do nothing, to return to the surface and leave the Sleeper turned on. Afraid to turn him off and let man seek his destiny. Afraid to make that decision for all the men who would come after.

He walked forward, and it was as if ghosts came to observe him, in that cavern out of time and space, where the peace had been kept for six hundred years; ghosts of all the men who had died, and silent staring eyes of men who had died of natural causes without having been burst like pods by shot and shell, who said silently, *We lived our full number of days...why are you doing this?*

He looked down at the control console. It was really quite simple, when he studied it. Simple, as all great art is simple. Uncomplicated and direct.

And he did what he had to do.

The mole hunched its way back up the shaft, and long before they reached the ocean bottom, Leaf had made his contact. He was jubilant, and congratulated Abbott. The war would start later that day, and of course Leaf would have the jump, for Laurrayne was still waiting.

In the mole, the team-members congratulated one another, for Leaf had said all monitoring had ceased on Earth. The Sleeper had been shut down. And they now confided in Abbott that they had been instructed that if he faltered in his task they were to have killed him and gone on without thinking about it. Leaf had implanted that in their minds; he was skillful, that fine man.

But now they assured Abbott that though they had had momentary doubts about his carrying it through, they could see that he was the strongest, the most conscientious of them all, and they were privileged to be serving under him in this Great Cause.

Abbott thanked them, and sat by himself to think.

To think of what he had done down there, in the Sleeper's chamber.

To think of his sudden thoughts back there. Not of the world, of the war, of the ones who would die now and the ones who would continue to die as long as man walked his world; not even of himself, or of Leaf, or of what had had to be done to get them there. His thoughts had been of the Sleeper.

Of the dead man who had continued on even after his body had turned to dust beneath the robe. Of the man who had spent lifetimes beyond his own lifetime that men could live in peace.

And he had turned him off.

No. Not quite.

The controls had been simple. Simple enough to re-route in something like a möbius circuit, feeding back in on itself; a closed circuit that began and ended with the Sleeper. He still thought his thoughts of peace, still monitored in a sweeping wave that went out and out and out—yet never really left him—and would never again encounter thoughts of war, because all he would be receiving would be his own thoughts of peace.

The Sleeper would continue to dream. And now, at last, there might be happiness in him, if he could still feel happiness somewhere in the mind that was no longer human. Because now he would believe man had finally grown accustomed to peace, had bred war out of his

system, was content, and happy, and productive.

Down there, the Sleeper would dream eternally, while overhead man would destroy himself again and again, and who could say which way was the better?

Only Abbott would know, and he would spend all the rest of his days remembering. Remembering what had been, what was, and what seemed to be...for the Sleeper. He had made his decision—and had it both ways.

But it made it no easier for him.

Terror waited for Abbott at: the end of the shaft.

Terror, and the new world.

And down there...

The only one who cared. Now helpless, duped by the least of the ones he had sought to save.

Asleep: with still hands.

—*Los Angeles and Santa Monica, 1968*

## SANTA CLAUS VS. S.P.I.D.E.R.

### I

It was half-past September when the red phone rang. Kris moved away from the warm and pliant form into which he had been folded, belly to back, and rubbed a hand across sticky eyes. The phone rang again. He could not make out the time on the luminous dial of his wrist watch. "What is it, honey?" mumbled the blonde woman beside him. The phone rang a third time. "Nothing, baby...go back to sleep," he soothed her. She burrowed deeper under the covers as he reached for the receiver, plucking it out of the cradle in the middle of a fourth imperative.

"Yeah?" His mouth tasted unhappy.

A voice on the other end said, "The King of Canaan needs your service."

Kris sat up. "Wait a minute, I'll take it on the extension." He thumbed the HOLD button, slipped out of the bed even as he racked the receiver and, naked, padded across the immense bedroom in the dark. He found his way through the hall and into the front office, guiding his passage only by the barest touch of fingertips to walls. He pulled the bronze testimonial plaque from the little people away from the wall, spun the dial on the wall safe, and pulled it open. The red phone with its complex scrambler attachment lurked in the circular opening.

He punched out code on the scrambler, lifted the receiver and said, "The king fears the devil, and the devil fears the Cross." Code and counter-code.

"Kris, it's S.P.I.D.E.R.," said the voice on the other end.

"Shit!" he hissed. "Where?"

"The States. Alabama, California, D.C., Texas..."

"Serious?"

"Serious enough to wake you."

"Right, right. Sorry. I'm still half-asleep. What time is it?"

"Half-past September."

Kris ran a hand through his thick hair. "Nobody any closer for this one?"

"Belly Button was handling it."

"Yeah...and...?"

“He floated to the top off the coast of Galveston. He must have been in the Gulf for almost a week. They packed plastic charges on his inner thighs...”

“Okay, don’t describe it. I’m mad enough at being shook out of sleep. Is there a dossier?”

“Waiting for you at Hilltop.”

“I’ll be there in six hours.”

He racked the receiver, slammed the safe port and spun the dial. He shoved the plaque back in place on the wall and stood with his balled fist lying against the bronze. Faint light from a fluorescent, left burning over one of the little people’s drafting tables, caught his tensed features. The hard, mirthless lines of his face were the work of a Giacometti. The eyes were gun-metal blue, and flat, as though unseeing. The faintly cruel mouth was thinned to an incision. He drew a deep breath and the muscle-corded body drew up with purpose.

Then, reaching over to his desk, he opened a drawer and rang three times, sharply, on a concealed button set into the underside of the drawer. Down below, in the labyrinth, PoPo would be plunging out of his cocoon, pulling on his loincloth and earrings, tapping out the code to fill the egress chamber with water.

“Peace on Earth...” Kris murmured, starting back for the bedroom and his wet suit.

## II

PoPo was waiting in the grotto, standing on a let-down shelf beside the air tanks. Kris nodded to the little one and turned his back. PoPo helped him into his rig, and when Kris had cleared the mouthpiece, adjusted the oxygen mixture. “Keeble keeble?” PoPo inquired.

“Sounds like it,” Kris replied. He wanted to be on his way.

“Dill-dill neat peemee,” PoPo said.

“Thanks. I’ll need it.” He moved quickly to the egress chamber which had been filled and emptied. He undogged the wheel and swung the port open. A few trickles of Arctic water hit the basalt floor. He turned. “Keep the toy plant going. And look into that problem on tier 9 with CorLo. I’ll be back in time for the holidays.”

He put one foot over the sill, then turned and added, “If everything goes okay.”

“Weeble zexfun,” said PoPo.

“Yeah, no war toys to you, too.” He stepped inside the egress chamber, spun the wheel hard to dog it, and signaled through the lucite port. PoPo filled the chamber and Kris blew himself out.

The water was black and sub-zero. The homing light on the sub



was his only comfort. He made it to the steel fish quickly, and within minutes was on his way. Once he had passed the outer extreme of the floe, he surfaced, converted to airborne, blew the tanks that extruded the pontoons, and taxied for a takeoff. Aloft, he made ramjet velocity and converted again.

Three hundred miles behind him, somewhere below the Arctic Ocean, PoPo was rousing CorLo from his cocoon and chiding the hell out of him for putting European threading on all the roller skates, thereby making all the American keys useless.

### III

Hilltop was inside a mountain in Colorado. The peak of the mountain swung open, allowing Kris's VTOL (the sub, in its third conversion) to drop down onto the target pad.

He went quickly to the secret place.

The Taskmaster was waiting for him with the dossier. Kris flipped it rapidly: eidetic memory.

"S.P.I.D.E.R. again," he said softly. Then, with an inquiring tone, "It means

SOCIETY FOR  
POLLUTION,  
INFECTION AND  
DESTRUCTION OF  
EARTHMEN'S  
RESOURCES

is that it?" The Taskmaster shook his head. Kris mmmmm'ed. "Well, what are they up to this time? I thought we'd put them out of commission after that anthrax business in the Valley of The Winds."

The Taskmaster tilted back in his plastic chair. The multi-faceted eyeball-globes around the room picked up pinpoints of brilliance from the chair and cast them over the walls in a subtle light-show. "It's as you read there. They've taken over the minds of those eight. What they intend to do with them, as puppets, we have no idea."

Kris scanned the list again. "Reagan, Johnson, Nixon, Humphrey, Daley, Wallace, Maddox, and—who's this last one?—Spiro Agnew?"

"Doesn't matter. We can usually keep them out of trouble, keep them from hurting themselves...but since S.P.I.D.E.R. got into them, they've been running amuck."

"I've never even heard of most of these."

"How the hell could you, up there, making toys."

"It's the best cover I've ever had."

“So don’t get crabby, just because you never see a newspaper. Take my word for it: these are the names this season.”

“Whatever happened to that whatwashisname...Willkie?”

“Didn’t pan out.”

“S.P.I.D.E.R.,” Kris said again. “Does it stand for

SPECIAL  
POLITBURO  
INTENT ON  
DESTROYING  
EVERYBODY’S  
RACE

?” The Taskmaster shook his head again, a bit wearily.

Kris rose and pumped the Taskmaster’s hand. “From the dossier, I suggest the best place to start is with this Daley, in Chicago.”

The Taskmaster nodded. “That’s what COMPgod said, too. You’d better stop down and see the Armorer before you leave. He’s cobbled up a few swell new surprises for you.”

“Will I be working that dumb red suit again?”

“As a spare, probably. It’s a little early for the red suit.”

“What time is it?”

“Half-past September.”

#### IV

When Kris emerged from the dropshaft, Miss Seven-Seventeen’s eyes grew round. He came toward her, with the easy, muscled stride that set him so far apart from the rest of the agents. (Most of them were little more than pudgy file-clerks; where had she ever gotten the idea that espionage was a line of work best suited to Adonises? Surely from the endless stream of bad spy novels that had glutted the newsstands; what a shock when she had discovered that pinching the trigeminal nerve to cause excruciating pain, or overpowering an enemy by cupping both hands and slapping both of his ears simultaneously were tactics as easily employed by men who resembled auks, as by beefcake contest winners. Tactics equally as effective when struck by gobbets of mud as by Rodin statues.) But Kris...

He came up to her desk, and stared down silently until she dropped her eyes. Then, “Hello, Chan.”

She could not look at him. It was too painful. The Bahamas. That night. The gibbous moon hanging above them like an all-watching eye as the night winds played a wild accompaniment counterpoint to their insensate passion, the lunatic surf breaking around them on the silver

sands. The goodbye. The waiting. The report from upstairs that he had been lost in Tibet. She could handle none of it...now...with him standing there...a thick, white scar across the breastbone, now hidden by his shirt, but known to her nonetheless, a scar made by Tibor Kaszlov's saber...she knew every inch of his flesh...and she could not answer. "Well, answer, stupid!" he said.

He seemed to understand.

She spoke into the intercom, "Kris is here, sir." The red light flashed on her board, and without looking up she said, "The Armorer will see you now."

He strode past her, seemingly intent on walking into the stone wall. At the last possible instant it slid back smoothly and he disappeared into the Armorer's workshop. The wall slid back and Seven-Seventeen suddenly realized she had been fisting so tightly that her lacquered nails had drawn blood from her palm.

The Armorer was a thickset, bluff man given to tweeds and pipes. His jackets were made specially for him on Savile Row, with many pockets, to hold the infinitude of gadgets and pipe tools he constantly carried.

"Kris, good to see you." He took the agent's hand and pumped it effusively. "Mmm. Harris tweed?"

"No, as a matter of fact it's one of those miracle fibers," Kris replied, turning smoothly to show the center-vent, depressed-waist, Edwardian-styled, patch-pocket jacket. "Something my man in Hong Kong whipped up. Like it?"

"Elegant," the Armorer said. "But we aren't here to discuss each other's sartorial elegance, are we?"

They had a small mutual laugh at that. Divided evenly, it took less than ten seconds. "Step over here," the Armorer said, moving toward a wall-rack where several gadgets were displayed on pegboard. "I think you'll find these most intriguing."

"I thought I wasn't supposed to use the red suit this time," Kris said tartly. The red suit was hung neatly on a teakwood valet near the wall.

The Armorer turned and gave him a surprised look. "Oh? Who told you that?"

Kris touched the suit, fingered it absently. "The Taskmaster."

The Armorer's mouth drew down in a frown. He pulled a pipe from a jacket pocket and thrust it between his lips. It was a Sasieni Fantail with an apple bowl shape, seriously in need of a carbon-cake scraping. "Well, let us just say the Taskmaster occasionally fails to follow his own lines of communication." He was obviously distressed, but Kris was in no mood to become embroiled in inter-office politics.

"Show me what you've got."

The Armorer pulled a small penlight-shaped gadget off one of the pegboards. There was a clip on its upper end for attaching to a shin pocket. "Proud of this one. I call it my deadly nightshade." He lit the pipe with a Consul butane lighter, turning up the flame till it was blue, just right for soldering.

Kris took the penlight-shaped gadget and turned it over and over. "Neat. Very compact."

The Armorer looked like a man who has just bought a new car, about to ask a neighbor to guess how much he had paid for it. "Ask me what it does."

"What does it do?"

"Spreads darkness for a radius of two miles."

"Great."

"No, really. I mean it. Just twist the clip to the right—no, no, don't do it now, for Christ's sake! you'll blot out all of Hilltop—when you get in a spot, and you need an escape, just twist that clip and pfizzzz you've got all the cover you need for an escape." The Armorer blew a dense cloud of pipe smoke: It was Murray's Erinmore Mixture, very aromatic.

Kris kept looking at the suit. "What's new with *that*?"

The Armorer pointed with the stem of the pipe. It was a mannerism. "Well, you've got the usual stuff: the rockets, the jet-pack, the napalm, the mace and the Mace, the throwing knives, the high-pressure hoses, the boot-spikes, the .30 calibre machine guns, the acid, the flammable beard, the stomach still inflates into a raft, the flamethrower, the plastic explosives, the red rubber nose grenade, the belt tool-kit, the boomerang, the bolo, the bolas, the machete, the derringer, the belt-buckle time bomb, the lockpick equipment, the scuba gear, the camera and Xerox attachment in the hips, the steel mittens with the extensible hooks, the gas mask, the poison gas, the shark repellent, the Sterno stove, the survival rations and the microfilm library of one hundred great books."

Kris fingered the suit again. "Heavy."

"But in addition," the Armorer said happily, "this time we've really extended ourselves down here in Armor—"

"You're doing a helluva job."

"Thanks, sincerely, Kris."

"No, I mean *really*!"

"Yes, well. In addition, this time the suit has been fully automated, and when you depress this third button on the jacket, the entire suit becomes inflatable, airborne, and seals for high-level flight."

Kris pulled a sour face. "If I ever fall over I'll be like a turtle on its back."

The Armorer gave Kris a jab of camaraderie, high on the left biceps. "You're a great kiddier, Kris." He pointed to the boots. "Gyroscopes. Keep you level at all times. You *can't* fall over."

"I'm a great kiddier. What else have you got for me?"

The Armorer stepped to the peg-board and pulled off an automatic pistol. "Try this."

He depressed a button on the control console and the east wall of the Armory dropped, revealing a concealed firing range behind it. Silhouette targets were lined up at the far end of the tunnel.

"What happened to my Wembley?" Kris asked.

"Too bulky. Too unreliable. Latest thing, you're holding: a Lassiter-Krupp laser explosive. Sensational!"

Kris turned, showing his thinnest side to the mute silhouettes. He extended and locked his right arm, bracing it with left hand around right wrist, and squeezed the trigger. A beam of light and a sibilant hiss erupted from the muzzle of the weapon. At the same instant, down the tunnel, all ten of the silhouettes vanished in a burst of blinding light. Shrapnel and bits of stone wall ricocheted back and forth in the tunnel. The sound of their destruction was deafening.

"Jesus God in Heaven," Kris murmured, turning back to the Armorer, who was only now removing the glare-blast goggles. "Why didn't you warn me about this stupid thing! I can't use one of these...I have to be surreptitious, circumspect, unnoticed. This bloody thing would be fine to level Gibraltar, but it's ridiculous for hand-to-hand combat. Here, take it!"

He thrust the weapon at the Armorer.

"Ingrate!"

"Give me my Wembley, you lunatic!"

"Take it, it's there on the wall, you short-sighted slave of the Establishment!"

Kris grabbed the automatic, and the deadly nightshade. "Send the suit care of my contact in Montgomery, Alabama," he said, hurrying toward the door.

"Maybe I will, and maybe I won't, you moron!"

Kris stopped and turned. "Listen, man, dammit, I can't stand here and argue with you about firepower. I've got to save the world!"

"Melodrama! Loud! Reactionary!"

"Cranky bastard! And I hate your damned blunderbuss, that's what...I *hate* the stupid loud thing!"

He reached the wall, which slid back, and dashed through. Just before it closed completely, the Armorer threw down his pipe, smashed it with his foot and screamed, "And I hate that faggy jacket of yours!"

Chicago, from the Shore Drive, looked like one immense burning garbage dump. They were rioting again on the South Side. And from the direction of Evanston and Skokie could be seen twin spiraling arms of thick, black smoke. In Evanston the D.A.R. was looting and burning; in Skokie the D.A.R. had joined with the women of the W.C.T.U. from Evanston, and the offices of a paperback pornographer were being razed. The city was going insane.

Kris drove the rental birdcage Maserati into Ohio Street, turned right onto the underground ramp of the motel, and let the attendant take it. Carrying only his attaché case, he made for the fire exit leading up to the first floor of the motel. Once inside the stairwell, however, he turned to the blank wall, used his sonic signaler, and the wall pivoted open. He hurried inside, closed the wall, and threw the attaché case onto the double bed. The

#### WAITING

light was glowing on the closed-circuit television. He flicked the set on, stood in front of the camera, and was pleased to see that his Chicago contact, Freya, was wearing her hair long again.

"Hello, Ten-Nineteen," he said.

"Hello, Kris. Welcome to the Windy City."

"You've got big troubles."

"How soon do you want to start? I've got Daley pinpointed."

"How soon can I get to him?"

"Tonight."

"Soon enough. What are you doing at the moment?"

"Not much."

"Where are you?"

"Down the hall."

"Come on over."

"In the afternoon!?"

"A healthy mind in a healthy body."

"See you in ten minutes."

"Wear the *Réplique*."

#### VI

Dressed entirely in black, the Wembley in an upside-down breakaway rig, its butt just protruding from his left armpit, Kris pulled himself across the open space between the electrified fence and the dark, squat powerhouse, his arms and legs crablike in the traditional infantryman's crawl.

Inside that building, Daley had been pinpointed by Ten-Nineteen's

tracking equipment. He had been there for almost two days, even through the riots.

Kris had asked Freya what he was up to, there in the powerhouse. She had not known. The entire building was damped, impenetrable to any sensors she had employed. But it was S.P.I.D.E.R. business, whatever it was—that had to be for dead certain. For a man in his position to be closeted away like that, while his city went up in flames—that had to be for *dead* certain.

Kris reached the base of the powerhouse. He slid along its face till he could see the blacked-over windows of the el above him. They were nearly a foot over his head. No purchase for climbing. He had to pull a smash&grab. He drew three deep breaths, broke the Wembley out of its packet and pulled the tape wound round the butt. It came loose, and he taped the weapon into his hand. Then three more deep breaths. Digging hard he dashed away from the building, thirty feet into the open, sucked in breath again, spun, and dashed back for the powerhouse. Almost at the face of the building he bent deeply from the knees, pushed off, and crossed his arms over his head as he smashed full into the window.

Then he was through, arching into the powerhouse, performing a tight somersault and coming down with knees still bent, absorbing the impact up through his hips. Glass tinkled all around him, his blacksuit was ripped raggedly down across the chest. His right arm came out, straight, the Wembley extended.

Light suddenly flooded the powerhouse. Kris caught the scene in one total impression: everything.

Daley was hunched over an intricate clockwork mechanism, set high on a podiumlike structure at the far end of the room. Black-light equipment throughout the room still glowed an evil rotting purple. Three men, wearing skintight outfits of pale green, were starting toward him, pulling off black-light goggles. A fourth man still had his hand on the knife-switch that had raised the interior lights. There was more.

Kris saw great serpentine connections running from Daley's clockwork mechanism, snaking across the floor to hookups on the walls. A blower system, immense and bulky, dominated one entire wall. Vats of some bubbling dark substance, almost like liquid smoke, ranked behind the podium.

"Stop him!" Daley screamed.

Kris had only a moment as the three men in green came for him. And in that instant he chose to firm his resolve for what was certainly to come. He always had this instant, on every assignment, and he had to prove to himself that it was right, what he must do, however brutal.

He chose, in that instant, to look at Daley; and his resolve was firmed more eloquently than he could have hoped. This was an evil old man. What might have been generous old age in another man, had been cemented into lines of unspeakable ugliness. This man was evil incarnate. Totally owned by S.P.I.D.E.R.

The three green men lumbered forward. Big men, heavily muscled, faces dulled with malice. Kris fired. He took the first one in the stomach, spinning him back and around, into one of his companions, who tried to sidestep, but went down in a twist of arms and legs as the first green man died. Kris pumped three shots into the tangle and the arms and legs ceased moving, save for an occasional quiver. The third man broke sidewise and tried to tackle Kris. He pulled back a step and shot him in the face. The green man went limp as a Raggedy Andy doll and settled comically onto his knees, then tumbled forward onto the meat that had been his head.

As though what had happened to his companions meant nothing to the fourth man, he stretched both arms out before him—zombielike—and stumbled toward Kris. The agent disposed of him with one shot.

Then he turned for Daley.

The man was raising a deadly-looking hand weapon with a needle-muzzle. Kris threw himself flat-out to the side. It was only empty space that Daley's weapon burned with its beam of sizzling crimson energy. Kris rolled, and rolled, and rolled right up to the blower system. Then he was up, had the Wembley leveled and yelled, "Don't make me do it, Daley!"

The weapon in Daley's hand tracked, came to rest on Kris, and the agent fired at that moment. The needle-nosed weapon shattered under the impact of the steel-jacketed round, and Daley fell backward off the podium.

Kris was on him in a moment.

He had him up on his feet, thrust against the podium, and a two-fingered paralyzer applied to a pressure point in the clavial depression before Daley could regain himself. Daley's mouth dropped open with the pain, but he could not speak. Kris hauled him up on the podium, a bit more roughly than was necessary, and threw him down at the foot of the clockwork mechanism.

It was incredibly complex, with timers and chronographs hooked in somehow between the vats of bubbling smoke and the blower system on the wall. Kris was absorbed in trying to understand precisely what the equipment *did*, when he heard the sigh at his feet. He glanced down just in time to see something so hideous he could not look at it straight on, emerge from Daley's right ear, slither and scuttle onto the floor of the podium, and then explode in a black puff of soot and filth. When Kris looked again, all that remained was a



dusty smear; what might be left should a child set fire to a heap of powdered magnesium and potassium nitrate.

Daley stirred. He rolled over on his back and lay gasping. Then he tried to sit. Kris knelt and helped him to a sitting position.

"Oh, my God, my God," Daley mumbled, shaking his head as if to clear it. The evil was gone from his face. Now he was little less than a kindly old gentleman who had been sick for a very very long time. "Thank you, whoever you are. Thank you."

Kris helped Daley to his feet, and the old man leaned against the clockwork mechanism.

"They took me over...years ago," he said.

"S.P.I.D.E.R., eh?" Kris said.

"Yes. Slipped inside my head, inside my mind. Evil. Totally evil. Oh, God, it was awful. The things I've done. The rotten, unconscionable things! I'm so ashamed. I have so much to atone for."

"Not you, Your Honor," said Kris, "S.P.I.D.E.R. *They're* the ones who'll pay. Even as this one did." The black splotch.

"No, no, no...*me!* I did all those terrible things, now *I* have to clean it all up. I'll tear down the South Side slums, the Back o' the Yards squalor. I'll hire the best city planners to make living space for all those black people I ignored, that I used shamefully for my own political needs. Not soulless high-rises wherein people stifle and lose their dignity, but decent communities filled with light and laughter. And I'll free the Polacks! And all the machine politics I used to use to assign contracts to inadequate builders...I'll tear down all those unsafe buildings and have them done right! I'll disband the secret gestapo I've been gathering all these years, and hire only those men who can pass a stringent police exam that will take into account how much humanitarianism they have in them. I'll landscape everything so this city will be beautiful. And then I'll have to give myself up for trial. I hope I don't get more than fifty years. I'm not that young any more."

Kris sucked on a tooth reflectively. "Don't get carried away, Your Honor."

Then he indicated the clockwork machine.

"What was this all about?"

Daley looked at the machine with loathing. "We'll have to destroy it. This was my part of the eight-point plan S.P.I.D.E.R. put into operation twenty-four years ago, to...to..."

He stumbled to a halt; a confused, perplexed look spread over his kindly features. He bit his lower lip.

"Yes, go on," Kris urged him, "to do what? What's S.P.I.D.E.R.'s master plan? What is their goal?"

Daley spread his hands. "I—I don't know."

“Then tell me...who *are* they? Where do they come from? We’ve battled them for years, but we have no more idea of who they are than when we started. They always self-destruct themselves like that one—” he nodded toward the sooty smear on the podium, “—and we haven’t been able to capture one. In fact, you’re the first pawn of theirs that we’ve ever captured alive.”

Daley kept nodding all through Kris’s unnecessary explanation. When the agent was finished, he shrugged. “All I remember—whatever it was in my head there, it seems to have kept me blocked off from learning anything very much—all I remember is that they’re from another planet.”

“Aliens!” Kris almost shouted, instantly grasping what Daley had said. “An eight-point plan. The other seven names on the list, and yourself. Each of you taking one phase of a master plan whose purpose we do not as yet understand.”

Daley looked at him. “You have a genuine gift for stating the obvious.”

“I like to synthesize things.”

“Amalgamate.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Forget it. Go on.”

Kris looked confused. “No, as a matter of fact, *you* go on. Tell me what this equipment here was supposed to do.”

“It’s still doing it. We haven’t shut it off.”

Kris looked alarmed. “How do we shut it off?”

“Push that button.”

Kris pushed the button, and almost immediately the vats stopped bubbling, the smoke-like substance in the vats subsided, the blowers ceased blowing, the clockwork machine slowed and stopped, the cuckoo turned blue and died, the hoses flattened, the room became silent. “What *did* it do?” Kris asked.

“It created and sowed smog in the atmosphere.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I’m *not* kidding. You don’t really think smog comes from factories and cars and cigarettes, do you? It cost S.P.I.D.E.R. a fortune to dummy up reports and put on a publicity campaign that it was cars and suchlike. In actuality, I’ve been spreading smog into the atmosphere for twenty-four years.”

“Sonofagun,” Kris said, with awe. Then he paused, looked cagey, and asked, “Tell me, since we now know that S.P.I.D.E.R. are aliens from outer space, does it mean

PREDATORY  
INVADERS  
DETERMINED TO  
ELIMINATE  
RATIONALITY

?” Daley stared at him. “Don’t ask *me*; no one tells me anything.”

Then he jumped down off the podium and started for the door to the powerhouse. Kris looked after him, then picked up a crowbar, and set about destroying the smog machine. When he had finished, sweating, and surrounded by crushed and twisted wreckage, he looked up to see Daley standing by the open door leading outside.

“Something I can do for you?” he asked.

Daley smiled wistfully. “No. Just watching. Now that I’m a nice fellah again, I wanted to see my last example of random, brutal violence. It’s going to be so quiet in Chicago.”

“Tough it out, baby,” Kris said, with feeling.

## VII

The eight-point plan seemed to tie together in Alabama. Wallace. But Wallace was off campaigning for something or other, and apparently the eight-point plan needed his special touch (filtered through the even gentler touch of a S.P.I.D.E.R. operative, inside his head) to be tied together. Kris decided to save Wallace for the last. Time was important, but Freya was covering for Daley and the death of the smog machine in Chicago, and frankly, time be hanged! This looked like the last showdown with S.P.I.D.E.R., so Kris informed Hilltop he was going to track down and eradicate the remaining seven points of the plan, with Wallace coming under his attention around Christmastime. It would press Kris close, but he was sure PoPo was on the job at the factory; and what had to be done...had to be done. It was going to be anything but easy. He thought wistfully of his Arctic home, the happily buzzing toy factory, the way Blitzen, particularly, nuzzled his palm when he brought the sugar cubes drenched in LSD, and the way the little mothers flew when they got loaded.

Then he pulled his thoughts away from happier times and cooler climes, setting out to wreck S.P.I.D.E.R. He took the remaining seven in order...

## VIII REAGAN: CAMARILLO, CALIFORNIA

Having closed down all the state mental institutions on the unassailable theory that nobody was really in need of psychiatric attention (“It’s all in their heads!” Reagan had said at a \$500-a-plate

American Legion dinner only six months earlier), Kris found him in the men's toilet on the first floor of the abandoned Camarillo state facility, combing his pompadour.

Reagan spun around, seeing Kris's reflection in the mirror, and screamed for help from one of his zombie assistants, a man in green, who was closeted in a pay toilet. (Inmates had been paid a monthly dole in Regulation Golden State Scrip, converted from monies sent to them by married children who didn't want their freako-devo-pervo relatives around; this Scrip could be used to work the pay toilets. Reagan had always believed in a pay-as-you-go system of state government.)

Kris hit the booth with a savate kick that shattered the door just as the man in green was emerging, the side of his shoe collapsing the man's spleen. Then the agent hurled himself on Reagan, in an attempt to capture him, subdue him, and somehow keep the S.P.I.D.E.R. symbiote within Reagan's head from self-destructing. But the devilishly handsome Reagan abruptly pulled away and as Kris watched, horrified, he began to shimmer and change shape.

In moments it was not Reagan standing before Kris, but a seven-headed Hydra, breathing from its seven mouths a) fire, b) ammonia clouds, c) dust, d) broken glass, e) chlorine gas, f) mustard gas and g) a combination of halitosis and rock music.

Three of the heads (c, e, & f) lunged forward on their serpentine necks, and Kris flattened against the toilet wall. His hand darted into his jacket and came out with a ball-point pen. He shook it twice, anticlockwise, and the pen converted into a two-handed sword. Wielding the carver easily, Kris lay about him with vigor, and in a few minutes the seven heads had been severed.

Kris aimed true for the heart of the beast, and ran it through. The great body thumped over on its side, and lay still. It shimmered and changed back into Reagan. Then the black thing scampered out of his ear, erupted and smeared the floor tiles with soot.

Later, Reagan combed his hair and applied pancake makeup to the glare spots on his nose and cheekbones, and moaned piteously about the really funky things he had done under the stupefying and incredibly evil direction of S.P.I.D.E.R. He swore he didn't know what the letters of the organization's name stood for. Kris was depressed.

Reagan then showed him around the Camarillo plant, explaining that *his* part of the eight-point plan was to use the great machines on the second and third floors to spread insanity through the atmosphere. They broke up the machines with some difficulty: much of the equipment was very hard plastic.

Reagan assured Kris he would work with Hilltop to cover the

demise of the second phase of the eight-point plan, and that from this day forward (he raised a hand in the Boy Scout salute) he would be as good as good could be: he would bring about much-needed property tax reform, he would stop *nuhdzing* the students at UCLA, he would subscribe to the *L.A. Free Press*, *The Avatar*, *The East Village Other*, the *Berkeley Barb*, *Horseshit*, *Open City* and all the other underground newspapers so he could find out what was *really* happening; and within the week he would institute daily classes in folk dancing, soul music and peaceful coercion for members of the various police departments within the state.

He was smiling like a man who has regained that innocence of childhood or nature that he had somehow lost.

### ***IX JOHNSON: JOHNSON CITY, TEXAS***

Kris found him eating mashed potatoes with his hands, sitting apart from the rest of the crowd. He looked like hell. He looked weary. There was half an eaten cow on a spit, turning lazily over charcoal embers. Kris settled down beside him and passed the time of day. He thought Kris was with the party. He belched. Then Kris snapped a finger against his right temple, and dragged his unconscious form into the woods.

When Johnson came around, he knew it was all over. The S.P.I.D.E.R. symbiote scuttled, erupted, smeared on the dead leaves—it was now the middle of October—and Johnson said he had to hurry off to stop the war. Kris didn't know which war he was referring to, but it sounded like a fine idea.

“Tell me,” said Kris, earnestly, “does S.P.I.D.E.R. mean

SECRET  
PREYERS  
INVOLVED IN  
DEMOLISHING  
EVERYTHING  
RIGHT-MINDED

or is it something even more obscure?”

Johnson spread his hands. He didn't know.

Johnson told him his part of the eight-point plan was fomenting war. And butchering babies. But now that was all over. He would recall the troops. He would let all the dissenters out of prison. He would retool for peace. He would send grain to needy nations. He would take elocution lessons. Kris shrugged and moved on.

### ***X HUMPHREY & NIXON: WASHINGTON, D.C.***

It was a week after the election. One of them was President. It didn't matter. The other one was shilling for the opposition, and between them they'd divided the country down the middle. Nixon was trying to get a good shave, and Humphrey was trying to learn to wear contact lenses that would make his eyes look bigger.

"You know, Dick, the trouble is, basically, I got funny little eyes, like a bird, y'know?"

Nixon turned from the mirror on the office wall and said, "You should complain. I've got five o'clock shadow and it's only three-thirty. Hey, who's that?"

Humphrey turned in the easy chair and saw Kris.

"Goodbye, S.P.I.D.E.R.," Kris said, and fired sleep-darts at each of them.

Before the darts could hit, the black things scuttled, erupted and smeared. "Damn!" Kris said, and left the office without waiting for Nixon and Humphrey to regain consciousness. It would be a week or two before that happened, in any case. The Armorer wasn't yet on-target when it came to gauging how long people stayed under with these darts. Kris left, because he knew their parts of the eight-point plan were to confuse issues, to sow confusion and dissension in the atmosphere. Johnson had told him that much. Now they would become sweet fellahs, and the President would play like he had a watchbird watching him, saying no-no.

Christmas was fast a-coming. Kris was homesick.

## ***XI***

S.P.I.D.E.R. tried to kill Kris in Memphis, Detroit, Cleveland, Great Falls and Los Angeles. They missed.

### ***XII MADDOX: ATLANTA, GEORGIA***

It was too ugly to describe. It was the only S.P.I.D.E.R. pawn that Kris had to kill. With a little gold ax-handle: a souvenir of Maddox's famous restaurant. Kris destroyed the nigger-hating machine, Maddox's part in the eight-point plan, and ate fried chicken all the way to Montgomery, Alabama.

### ***XIII WALLACE: MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA***

The red-suited Santa Claus trudged across the open square in front of the Montgomery state building, clanging his little brass bell. The Santa Claus was fat, jolly, bearded, and possibly the deadliest man in the world.

Kris looked around him as he plowed through the ankle-deep snow. The state buildings were clustered around the perimeter of the

circular square, and he had a terrible prickling feeling up and down his spine. It might have been the cumbersome suit with all its equipment, so confining it made him sweat even in the midst of December 24th cold and whiteness. His boots were soaking wet from the snow, his pace measured, as he climbed the State House steps... watching.

Everything was closed down for the holidays. All Alabama state facilities. Yet there was movement inside the city...last-minute shoppers hurrying to fulfill their quotas as happy consumers...children scurrying here and there, seeming to be going somewhere, but probably just caroming. (Kris always smiled when he saw the kids; they were truly the only hope; they had to be protected; not cut off from reality, but simply protected; and the increasing cynicism in the young had begun to disturb him; yet it seemed as though the young activists were fighting against everything S.P.I.D.E.R. stood for, unconsciously, but doing a far better job than their elders.)

A man, hurrying past, down the steps, bundled to the chin in a heavy topcoat, glanced sidewise, squinting, and ignored the outstretched donation cup the Santa Claus proffered. Kris continued on up.

The tracking devices inside the fur-tasseled hat he wore now beeped and the range-finding trackers were phasing higher as Kris neared Wallace. It was going to be a problem getting into the building. But then, if it weren't for problems making it necessary to carry such a surfeit of equipment in the red suit, Santa Claus would be a thin, svelte figure. "Ho ho ho," Kris murmured, expelling puffs of frosty air.

As he reached the first landing of the State House, Kris began the implementation of his plan to gain access. Fingertipping the suit controls in the palm of his right mitten, he directed the high-pressure hoses toward a barred window on the left wing of the State House. Once they had locked-in directionally, Kris coded the tubes to run acid and napalm, depressed the firing studs, and watched as the hoses sprayed the window with acid, dissolving bars and glass alike. Then the napalm erupted from the hoses in a burning spray, arcing over the snow and striking the gaping hole in the face of the State House. In moments the front of the State House was burning.

Kris hit the jet-pack and went straight up. When he was hovering at two hundred feet, he cut in the rockets and zoomed over the State House. The rockets died and Kris settled slowly, then cut out the jet-pack. He was on the roof...unseen. The fire would keep their attention. At this stage in the eradication of the eight-point plan they would be expecting him, but they wouldn't know it would be this

formidable an assault force.

The geigers were giving a hot reading from the North Wing of the State House. His seven-league boots allowed him to leap over in three strides, and he packed plastic charges along the edges of the roof, damping them with implosion spray so the force of their blast would be directed straight down. Then he set the timer and leaped back to the section of roof where his trackers gave him the strongest Wallace reading. Extending the hooks in his mittens, he cut a circular patch in the roof, then burned it out with acid. It hung in its place. Suddenly, the plastic charges went off on the roof of the North Wing, and under cover of the tumult, he struck! He used the boot-spikes to kick in the circular patch he'd cut in the roof. The circular opening had cut through the roofing material; now he used the flamethrower to burn through the several layers of lath and plaster and beaming, till all that stood between him and entrance was the plaster of the ceiling. He withdrew a grenade from the inner pockets of the capacious suit, pulled the pin, released the handle, and dropped it into the hole. There was a sharp, short explosion, and when the plaster dust cleared he was free to leap down inside the Alabama State House.

Kris jumped, setting the boots for light bounce.

He jumped into a readily waiting group of green-suited zombies. "Ho ho ho!" Kris chortled again, opening up with the machine guns. Bodies spun and flopped and caromed off walls, and seconds later the reception squad was stacked high in its own seepage of blood.

They had barricaded the doors to the room. Kris now had no time for lockpicks. He pulled off his red rubber nose and hurled it. The doors exploded outward in a cascading shower of splintered toothpickery. He plunged through the smoke and still-flying wreckage, hit the hallway, turned to follow the pinging urgency of his trackers. Wallace was moving. Trying to get away? Maybe.

Hauling out the bolo knife, he dashed forward again. Green-suited zombies came at him from a cross-corridor and he hacked his way through them without pause. A shot spanged off the wall beside his ear and he half-turned, letting a throwing-knife drop into his hand from its oiled sheath. The marksman was half-in, half-out of a doorway down the corridor. Kris let the knife slide down his palm, caught it by the tip, and in one quicksilver movement overhanded it. The knife just scored the edge of the doorjamb and buried itself in the zombie's throat. He disappeared inside the room.

The trackers were now indicating a blank wall at the end of a cul-de-sac. Kris came on at it, full out, his suit's body armor locked for ramming. He hit the wall and went right through. Behind the blank face of the cul-de-sac was a stone stairway, leading down into the



darkness. Zombies lurked on those stairs. The .30 cal's were good enough for them; Kris fled down the stairs, firing ahead of him. The zombies peeled away and fell into darkness.

At the bottom he found the underground river, and saw the triangular black blades of shark dorsals.

Still murmuring ho ho ho, Kris dove headfirst into the stygian blackness. The water closed over him, and nothing more could be seen, save the thrashing of sharks.

Less than an hour later, the entire Alabama State House and much of the public square went straight up in a hellfire explosion of such ferocity that windows were knocked out in slat-back houses of po' darkies in Selma.

## XIV

She was lightly scraping her long painted fingernails down his naked back. He lay prone on the bed, occasionally reaching to the nightstand for a pull on the whiskey and water. The livid scars that still pulsed on his back seemed to attract her. She wet her full lips, and her naked, large-nippled breasts heaved as she surveyed his body.

"He fought to the end. The sonofabitch was the only one of the eight who really *liked* that black thing in his head. Really, genuinely evil. Worst of the bunch; no wonder S.P.I.D.E.R. picked him to ramrod the eight-point plan." He buried his face in the pillow, as though trying to blot out the memory of what had gone before.

"I waited three and a half months for you to come back," the blonde said, tidying her bosom. "The least you could do is tell me where you *were*!"

He turned over and grabbed her. He pulled her down to him and ran his hands over her lush flesh. She seemed to burn with a special heat. Much, much later, some time in mid-January, he released her, and said, "Baby, it's just too goddam ugly to talk about. All I'll say is that if there had been *any* chance of saving that Wallace mother from his own meanness, I'd have taken it."

"He was killed?"

"When the underground caverns blew. Sank half the state of Alabama. Funny thing was...it sunk mostly Caucasian holdings. All the ghettos are still standing. The new governor—Shabbaz X. Turner—has declared the entire state a disaster area, and he's got the Black Cross organized to come in and help all the poor white folks who were refugee'd by the explosion. That bastard Wallace must have had the entire state wired."

"Sounds dreadful."

"Dreadful? You know what that fink had as his part of the eight-point plan?"

The girl looked at him wide-eyed.

"I'll tell you. It was his job—through the use of tremendously sophisticated equipment—to harden the thought-processes of the young, to age them. To set their concepts like concrete. When we exploded all that devil's machinery, suddenly everyone started thinking freely, digging each other, turning to one another and realizing that the world was in a sorry state, and that what they'd been sure of, a moment before, might just possibly be in question. He was literally turning the young into old. And it was causing aging."

"You mean we don't age naturally?"

"Hell no. It was S.P.I.D.E.R. that was making us get older and older, and fall apart. Now we'll all stay the way we are, reach an age physically of about thirty-six or -seven, and then coast on out for another two or three hundred years. And oh yeah, no cancer."

"That too?"

Kris nodded.

The blonde lay on her back, and Kris traced a pattern on her stomach with his large, scarred hands. "Just one thing," the blonde said.

"Yeah, what's that?"

"What was S.P.I.D.E.R.'s eight-point plan all about? I mean, aside from the individual elements of making everyone hate everyone else, what were they trying for?"

Kris shrugged. "That, and what the name S.P.I.D.E.R. means, we may never know. Now that their organization has been broken up. Shame. I would've liked to've known."

*And you will know*, a voice suddenly said, inside Kris's head. The blonde rose up off the bed and withdrew a deadly stinger pistol from beneath the pillow. *Our agents are everywhere*, she said, telepathically.

"You!" Kris ejaculated.

*Since the moment you returned, after Christmas. While you were recuperating from your wounds, lying there unconscious, I slipped in—having trailed you from Alabama—that's why you never found evidence that Wallace's symbiote had self-destructed—I slipped in and invaded this poor husk. What made you think you had beaten us, fool? We are everywhere. We came to this planet sixty years ago—check your history; you'll find the exact date. We are here, and here we stay. For the present to wage a terrorist war, but soon—to take everything for ourselves. The eight-point plan was our most ambitious to date.*

"Ambitious!" Kris sneered. "Hate, madness, cancer, prejudice, confusion, subservience, smog, corruption, aging...what kind of filth are you?"

*We are S.P.I.D.E.R.* the voice said, while the blonde held the needle

on him. *And once you know what S.P.I.D.E.R. stands for, you will know what our eight-part plan was intended to do to you poor, weak Earthmen.*

*Watch!* The voice was jubilant.

And the S.P.I.D.E.R. symbiote crawled out of her ear and darted for Kris's throat. He reacted instantly, spinning off the bed. The symbiote missed his throat by micro-millimeters. Kris hit the wall, shoved off with a bare foot and dove back onto the bed, scrambling around the blonde, grabbing her hand, and directing the needle of the weapon at the symbiote. It scuttled for cover, even as the lethal blast seared across the bedsheets. Then Kris grabbed for the deadly nightshade, on the bedstand beside him, and hurled it.

Instantly, all of the underground toy-making complex was awash in darkness.

He felt the blonde jerk in his grasp, and he knew that the S.P.I.D.E.R. symbiote had fled back to its one place of safety. Inside her. He had no choice but to kill her. But she threw the needle away, and he was locked there in eternal darkness, on the bed, holding her body as it struggled to free itself; and he was forced by his nakedness to kill her using the one weapon God had given him when he came into the world.

It was a special weapon, and it took almost a week to kill her.

But when it was over, and the darkness had cleared, he lay there thinking. Exhausted, ten pounds lighter, weak as a kitten, and thinking.

Now he knew what S.P.I.D.E.R. meant.

The symbiote was small, black, hairy, and scuttled on many little legs. The eight-point plan was intended to make people feel bad. That simple. It was to make them feel simply crummy. And crummy people kill each other. And people who kill each other leave a world intact enough for S.P.I.D.E.R.

All he had to do was delete the periods.

## **XV**

The time/motion studies came in the next week. They said that the deliveries this past holiday had been the sloppiest on record. Kris and PoPo shuffled the reports and smiled. Well, it would be better next year. No wonder it was so sloppy this year...how effective was a Santa Claus who was really an imposter? How effective could Santa Claus be when he was PoPo and CorLo, the one standing on the other's shoulders, wearing a red suit three sizes too big for them? But with Kris laid up from saving the world, they had had no choice.

There were complaints coming in from all over.

Even from Hilltop.

“PoPo,” Kris said, when the phones refused to cease clanging, “I’m not taking any calls. They want me, they can reach me at Antibes. I’m going off to sleep for three months. They can reach me in April sometime.”

He started out of the office just as CorLo ran in, a wild expression on his face. “Geeble gip freesee jim jim,” CorLo said. Kris slumped back into his seat.

He dropped his head into his hands.

Everything went wrong.

Dasher had knocked-up Vixen.

“The shits just won’t let you live,” Kris murmured, and began crying.

—Los Angeles, 1968

*EDITOR’S NOTE: the astute reader will be quick to notice that Mr. Ellison’s story has one small flaw in it. The insidious eight-point plan totally ignores the Republican vice-presidential candidate, Mr. Spiro Agnew. Apparently the Author forgot him. Apparently the Author was not the only one.*

## TRY A DULL KNIFE

It was *pachanga* night at The Cave. Three spick bands all going at once, each with a fat momma shaking her meat and screaming ¡*Vaya!* The sound was something visible, an assault in silver lamé and screamhorn. Sound hung dense as smog-cloud, redolent as skunk-scent from a thousand roaches of the best shit, no stems or seeds. Darkness shot through with the quicksilver flashes of mouths open to show gold bridgework and dirty words. Eddie Burma staggered in, leaned against a wall and felt the sickness as thick as cotton wool in his throat.

The deep scar-burn of pain was bleeding slowly down his right side. The blood had started coagulating, his shirt stuck to his flesh, but he dug it: it wasn't pumping any more. But he was in trouble, that was the righteous truth. Nobody can get cut the way Eddie Burma'd been cut and not be in deep trouble.

And somewhere back out there, in the night, they were moving toward him, coming for him. He had to get through to—who? Somebody. Somebody who could help him; because only now, after fifteen years of what had been happening to him, did Eddie Burma finally know what it was he had been through, what had been done to him...what was *being* done to him...what they would certainly do to him.

He stumbled down the short flight of steps into The Cave and was instantly lost in the smoke and smell and twisting shadows. Ethnic smoke, Puerto Rican smells, lush shadows from another land. He dug it; even with his strength ebbing, he dug it.

That was Eddie Burma's problem. He was an empath. He felt. Deep inside himself, on a level most people never even know exists, he felt for the world. Involvement was what motivated him. Even here, in this slum nightclub where intensity of enjoyment substituted for the shallow glamour and gaucherie of the uptown boîtes, here where no one knew him and therefore could not harm him, he felt the pulse of the world's life surging through him. And the blood started pumping again.

He pressed his way back through the crowd, looking for a phone booth, looking for a toilet, looking for an empty booth where he could hide, looking for the person or persons unknown who could save him from the dark night of the soul slipping toward him inexorably.

He caromed off a waiter, Pancho Villa moustache, dirty white apron, tray of draft beers. "Hey, where's the *gabinetto*?" he slurred the request. His words were slipping in their own blood.

The Puerto Rican waiter stared at him. Uncomprehending. "¿Perdón?"

"The toilet, the *pissoire*, the can, the head, the crapper. I'm bleeding to death, where's the potty?"

"Ohhh!" meaning dawned on the waiter. "¡Excusados...atavio!" He pointed. Eddie Burma patted him on the arm and slumped past, almost falling into a booth where a man and two women were groping one another darkly.

He found the door to the toilet and pushed it open. A reject from a Cuban superman film was slicking back his long, oiled hair in an elaborate pompadour before the foggy mirror. He gave Eddie Burma a passing glance and went back to the topography of his coiffure. Burma moved past him in the tiny room and slipped into the first stall.

Once inside, he bolted the door, and sat down heavily on the lidless toilet. He pulled his shirt up out of his pants, and unbuttoned it. It stuck to his skin. He pulled, gently, and it came away with the sound of mud squished underfoot. The knife wound ran from just below the right nipple to the middle of his waist. It was deep. He was in trouble.

He stood up, hanging the shirt on the hook behind the door, and pulled hanks of toilet paper from the gray, crackly roll. He dipped the paper in a wad, into the toilet bowl, and swabbed at the wound. Oh, God, *really* deep.

Then nausea washed over him, and he sat down again. Strange thoughts came to him, and he let them work him over:

*This morning, when I stepped out the front door, there were yellow roses growing on the bushes. It surprised me; I'd neglected to cut them back last fall, and I was certain the gnurled, blighted knobs at the ends of the branches—still there, silently dead in reproach of my negligence—would stunt any further beauty. But when I stepped out to pick up the newspaper, there they were. Full and light yellow, barely a canary yellow. Breathing moistly, softly. It made me smile, and I went down the steps to the first landing, to get the paper. The parking lot had filled with leaves from the eucalyptus again, but somehow, particularly this morning, it gave the private little area surrounding and below my secluded house in the hills a more lived-in, festive look. For the second time, for no sensible reason, I found myself smiling. It was going to be a good day, and I had the feeling that all the problems I'd taken on—all the social cases I took unto myself—Alice and Burt and Linda down the hill—all the emotional cripples who came to me for succor—would shape up, and we'd all be smiling by end of*

day. And if not today, then certainly by Monday. Friday, the latest.

*I picked up the paper and snapped the rubber band off it. I dropped the rubber band into the big metal trash basket at the foot of the stairs, and started climbing back up to the house, smelling the orange blossoms and the fine, chill morning air. I opened the paper as I climbed, and with all the suddenness of a freeway collision, the morning calm vanished from around me. I was stopped in mid-step, one leg raised for the next riser, and my eyes felt suddenly grainy, as though I hadn't had enough sleep the night before. But I had.*

*The headline read: EDWARD BURMA FOUND MURDERED.*

*But...I was Eddie Burma.*

He came back from memories of yellow roses and twisted metal on freeways to find himself slumped against the side of the toilet stall, his head pressed to the wooden wall, his arms hanging down, the blood running into his pants top. His head throbbed, and the pain in his side was beating, hammering, pounding with a regularity that made him shiver with fear. He could not sit there, and wait.

Wait to die, or wait for them to find him.

He knew they would find him. He knew it.

The phone. He could call...

He didn't know whom he could call. But there had to be someone. Someone out there who would understand, who would come quickly and save him. Someone who wouldn't take what was left of him, the way the others would.

They didn't need knives.

How strange that *that* one, the little blonde with the Raggedy Ann shoebutton eyes, had not known that. Or perhaps she had. But perhaps also the frenzy of the moment had overcome her, and she could not simply feed leisurely as the others did. She had cut him. Had done what they all did, but directly, without subtlety.

Her blade had been sharp. The others used much more devious weapons, subtler weapons. He wanted to say to her, "Try a dull knife." But she was too needing, too eager. She would not have heard him.

He struggled to his feet, and put on his shirt. It hurt to do it. The shirt was stained the color of teak with his blood. He could barely stand now.

Pulling foot after foot, he left the toilet, and wandered out into The Cave. The sound of "Mamacita Lisa" beat at him like gloved hands on a plate glass window. He leaned against the wall, and saw only shapes moving moving moving in the darkness. Were they out there? No, not yet; they would never look here first. He wasn't known here. And his essence was weaker now, weaker as he died, so no one in the crowd would come to him with a quivering need. No one would feel it

possible to drink from this weak man, lying up against a wall.

He saw a pay phone, near the entrance to the kitchen, and he struggled toward it. A girl with long dark hair and haunted eyes stared at him as he passed, started to say something, then he summoned up strength to hurry past her before she could tell him she was pregnant and didn't know who the father was, or she was in pain from emphysema and didn't have doctor money, or she missed her mother who was still in San Juan. He could handle no more pains, could absorb no more anguish, could let no others drink from him. He didn't have that much left for his own survival.

*My fingertips (he thought, moving) are covered with the scars of people I've touched. The flesh remembers those touches. Sometimes I feel as though I am wearing heavy woolen gloves, so thick are the memories of all those touches. It seems to insulate me, to separate me from mankind. Not mankind from me, God knows, because they get through without pause or difficulty—but me, from mankind. I very often refrain from washing my hands for days and days, just to preserve whatever layers of touches might be washed away by the soap.*

*Faces and voices and smells of people I've known have passed away. But still my hands carry the memories on them. Layer after layer of the laying-on of hands. Is that altogether sane? I don't know. I'll have to think about it for a very long time, when I have the time.*

*If I ever have the time.*

He reached the pay phone; after a very long time he was able to bring a coin up out of his pocket. It was a quarter. All he needed was a dime. He could not go back down there, he might not make it back again. He used the quarter, and dialed the number of a man he could trust, a man who could help him. He remembered the man now, knew the man was his only salvation.

He remembered seeing him in Georgia, at a revival meeting, a rural stump religion circus of screaming and Hallelujahs that sounded like !H!A!L!L!E!L!U!J!A!H! with dark black faces or red necks all straining toward the seat of God on the platform. He remembered the man in his white shirt sleeves, exhorting the crowd, and he heard again the man's spirit message.

“Get right with the Lord, before *he* gets right with *you*! Suffer your silent sins no longer! Take out your truth, carry it in your hands, give it to me, all the ugliness and cesspool filth of your souls! I'll wash you clean in the blood of the lamb, in the blood of the Lord, in the blood of the truth of the word! There's no other way, there's no great day coming without purging yourself, without cleansing your spirit! I can handle all the pain you've got boiling around down in the black lightless pit of your souls! Hear me, dear God hear me...I am your



mouth, your tongue, your throat, the horn that will proclaim your deliverance to the Heavens above! Evil and good and worry and sorrow, all of it is mine, I can carry it, I can handle it, I can lift it from out of your mind and your soul and your body! The place is here, the place is me, give me your woe! Christ knew it, God knows it, *I* know it, and now *you* have to know it! Mortar and trowel and brick and cement make the wall of your need! Let me tear down that wall, let me hear all of it, let me into your mind and let me take your burdens! I'm the strength, I'm the watering place...come drink from my strength!"

And the people had rushed to him. All over him, like ants feeding on a dead beast. And then the memory dissolved. The image of the tent revival meeting dissolved into images of wild animals tearing at meat, of hordes of carrion birds descending on fallen meat, of small fish leaping with sharp teeth at helpless meat, of hands and more hands, and teeth that sank into meat.

The number was busy.

It was busy again.

He had been dialing the same number for nearly an hour, and the number was always busy. Dancers with sweating faces had wanted to use the phone, but Eddie Burma had snarled at them that it was a matter of life and death that he reach the number he was calling, and the dancers had gone back to their partners with curses for him. But the line was still busy. Then he looked at the number on the pay phone, and knew he had been dialing himself all that time. That the line would always *always* be busy, and his furious hatred of the man on the other end who would not answer was hatred for the man who was calling. He was calling himself, and in that instant he remembered who the man had been at the revival meeting. He remembered leaping up out of the audience and taking the platform to beg all the stricken suffering ones to end their pain by drinking of his essence. He remembered, and the fear was greater than he could believe. He fled back to the toilet, to wait for them to find him.

Eddie Burma, hiding in the refuse room of a sightless dark spot in the netherworld of a universe that had singled him out for reality. Eddie Burma was an individual. He had substance. He had corporeality. In a world of walking shadows, of zombie breath and staring eyes like the cold dead flesh of the moon, Eddie Burma was a real person. He had been born with the ability to belong to his times; with the electricity of nature that some called charisma and others called warmth. He felt deeply; he moved through the world and touched; and was touched.

His was a doomed existence, because he was not only an extrovert

and gregarious, but he was truly clever, vastly inventive, suffused with humor, and endowed with the power to listen. For these reasons he had passed through the stages of exhibitionism and praise-seeking to a state where his reality was assured. Was very much his own. When he came into a room, people knew it. He had a face. Not an image, or a substitute life that he could slip on when dealing with people, but a genuine reality. He was Eddie Burma, only Eddie Burma, and could not be confused with anyone else. He went his way, and he was identified as Eddie Burma in the eyes of anyone who ever met him. He was one of those memorable people. The kind other people who have no lives of their own talk about. He cropped up in conversations: "Do you know what Eddie said...?" or "Guess what happened to Eddie?" And there was never any confusion as to who was the subject under discussion.

Eddie Burma was a figure no larger than life, for life itself was large enough, in a world where most of those he met had no individuality, no personality, no reality, no existence of their own.

But the price he paid was the price of doom. For those who had nothing came to him and, like creatures of darkness, amorally fed off him. They drank from him. They were the succubi, draining his psychic energies. And Eddie Burma always had more to give. Seemingly a bottomless well, the bottom had been reached. Finally. All the people whose woes he handled, all the losers whose lives he tried to organize, all the preying crawlers who slinked in through the ashes of their non-existence to sup at his board, to slake the thirsts of their emptiness...all of them had taken their toll.

Now Eddie Burma stumbled through the last moments of his reality, with the wellsprings of himself almost totally drained. Waiting for them, for all his social cases, all his problem children, to come and finish him off.

*I live in a hungry world*, Eddie Burma now realized.

"Hey, man! C'mon outta th'crapper!" The booming voice and the pounding on the stall door came as one.

Eddie trembled to his feet and unbolted the door, expecting it to be one of them. But it was only a dancer from The Cave, wanting to rid himself of cheap wine and cheap beer. Eddie stumbled out of the stall, almost falling into the man's arms. When the beefy Puerto Rican saw the blood, saw the dead pale look of flesh and eyes, his manner softened.

"Hey...you okay, man?"

Eddie smiled at him, thanked him softly, and left the toilet. The nightclub was still high, still screaming, and Eddie suddenly knew he could not let *them* find this good place, where all these good people were plugged into life and living. Because for *them* it would be a

godsend, and they would drain The Cave as they had drained him.

He found a rear exit, and emerged into the moonless city night, as alien as a cavern five miles down or the weird curvature of another dimension. This alley, this city, this night, could as easily have been Transylvania or the dark side of the moon or the bottom of the thrashing sea. He stumbled down the alley, thinking...

*They have no lives of their own. Oh, this poisoned world I now see so clearly. They have only the shadowy images of other lives, and not even real other lives—the lives of movie stars, fictional heroes, cultural clichés. So they borrow from me, and never intend to pay back. They borrow, at the highest rate of interest. My life. They lap at me, and break off pieces of me. I'm the mushroom that Alice found with the words EAT ME in blood-red on my id. They're succubi, draining at me, draining my soul. Sometimes I feel I should go to some mystical well and get poured full of personality again. I'm tired. So tired.*

*There are people walking around this city who are running on Eddie Burma's drained energies, Eddie Burma's life-force. They're putt-putting around with smiles just like mine, with thoughts I've second-handed like old clothes passed on to poor relatives, with hand movements and expressions and little cute sayings that were mine, Scotch-taped over their own. I'm a jigsaw puzzle and they keep stealing little pieces. Now I make no scene at all, I'm incomplete, I'm unable to keep the picture coherent, they've taken so much already.*

They had come to his party, all of the ones he knew. The ones he called his friends, and the ones who were merely acquaintances, and the ones who were using him as their wizard, as their guru, their psychiatrist, their wailing wall, their father confessor, their repository of personal ills and woes and inadequacies. Alice, who was afraid of men and found in Eddie Burma a last vestige of belief that males were not all beasts. Burt, the box-boy from the supermarket, who stuttered when he spoke, and felt rejected even before the rejection. Linda, from down the hill, who had seen in Eddie Burma an intellectual, one to whom she could relate all her theories of the universe. Sid, who was a failure, at fifty-three. Nancy, whose husband cheated on her. John, who wanted to be a lawyer, but would never make it because he thought too much about his clubfoot. And all the others. And the new ones they always seemed to bring with them. There were always so many new ones he never knew. Particularly the pretty little blonde with the Raggedy Ann shoebutton eyes, who stared at him hungrily.

And from the first, earlier that night, he had known something was wrong. There were too many of them at the party. More than he could handle...and all listening to him tell a story of something that had happened to him when he had driven to New Orleans in 1960 with

Tony in the Corvette and they'd both gotten pleurisy because the top hadn't been bolted down properly and they'd passed through a snowstorm in Illinois.

All of them hung to his words, like drying wash on a line, like festoons of ivy. They sucked at each word and every expression like hungry things pulling at the marrow in beef bones. They laughed, and they watched, and their eyes glittered...

Eddie Burma had slowly felt the strength ebbing from him. He grew weary even as he spoke. It had happened before, at other parties, other gatherings, when he had held the attention of the group, and gone home later, feeling drained. He had never known what it was.

But tonight the strength did not come back. They kept watching him, seemed to be *feeding* at him, and it went on and on, till finally he'd said he had to go to sleep, and they should go home. But they had pleaded for one more anecdote, one more joke told with perfect dialect and elaborate gesticulation. Eddie Burma had begun to cry, quietly. His eyes were red-rimmed, and his body felt as though the bones and musculature had been removed, leaving only a soft rubbery coating that might at any moment cave in on itself.

He had tried to get up; to go and lie down; but they'd gotten more insistent, had demanded, had ordered, had grown nasty. And then the blonde had come at him, and cut him, and the others were only a step behind. Somehow...in the thrashing tangle that had followed, with his friends and acquaintances now tearing at one another to get at him, he had escaped. He had fled, he did not know how, the pain of his knifed side crawling inside him. He had made it into the trees of the little glen where his house was hidden, and through the forest, over the watershed, down to the highway, where he had hailed a cab. Then into the city...

*See me! See me, please! Just don't always come and take. Don't bathe in my reality and then go away feeling clean. Stay and let some of the dirt of you rub off on me. I feel like an invisible man, like a drinking trough, like a sideboard dripping with sweetmeats...Oh God, is this a play, and myself unwillingly the star? How the hell do I get off stage? When do they ring down the curtain? Is there, please God, a man with a hook...?*

*I make my rounds, like a faith healer. Each day I spend a little time with each one of them. With Alice and with Burt and with Linda down the hill; and they take from me. They don't leave anything in exchange, though. It's not barter, it's theft. And the worst part of it is I always needed that, I always let them rob me. What sick need was it that gave them entrance to my soul? Even the pack rat leaves some worthless object when it steals a worthless object. I'd take anything from them: the smallest anecdote, the most used-up thought, the most stagnant concept, the puniest*

*pun, the most obnoxious personal revelation...anything! But all they do is sit there and stare at me, their mouths open, their ears hearing me so completely they empty my words of color and scent...I feel as though they're crawling into me. I can't stand any more...really I can't.*

The mouth of the alley was blocked.

Shadows moved there.

Burt, the box-boy. Nancy and Alice and Linda. Sid, the failure. John, who walked with a rolling motion. And the doctor, the juke-box repairman, the pizza cook, the used-car salesman, the swinging couple who swapped partners, the discothèque dancer...all of them.

They came for him.

And for the first time he noticed their teeth.

The moment before they reached him stretched out as silent and timeless as the decay that ate at his world. He had no time for self-pity. It was not merely that Eddie Burma had been cannibalized every day of the year, every hour of the day, every minute of every hour of every day of every year. The awareness dawned unhappily—in that moment of timeless time—that he had let them do it to him. That he was no better than they, only different. They were the feeders—and he was the food. But no nobility could be attached to one or the other. He needed to have people worship and admire him. He needed the love and attention of the masses, the worship of monkeys. And for Eddie Burma that was a kind of beginning to death. It was the death of his unselfconsciousness; the slaughter of his innocence. From that moment forward, he had been aware of the clever things he said and did, on a cellular level below consciousness. He was aware. Aware, aware, aware!

And awareness brought them to him, where they fed. It led to self-consciousness, petty pretensions, ostentation. And that was a thing devoid of substance, of reality. And if there was anything on which his acolytes could not nourish, it was a posturing, phony, *empty* human being.

They would drain him.

The moment came to a timeless climax, and they carried him down under their weight, and began to feed.

When it was over, they left him in the alley. They went to look elsewhere.

With the vessel drained, the vampires moved to other pulsing arteries.

## THE PITLL PAWOB DIVISION

Mourg radiated with annoyance. The work was piling up, and the division was understaffed, and he knew—as certainly as there was vapor for all—that before his next shedding, they would ship in more of those.

He radiated, he revolved, and he thrommed. But the aperture glowed, even as he knew it would, and one of *them* stood there... blinking, waving *its* appendages, and mouthing (he had learned the word from an earlier one of *them*) meaningless sounds. Ah, oh, there was a sound he'd heard before: he recognized the way the face aperture formed it, and the vibrations *it* made in the vapor. He felt the sound with his da-linquers, yes it was the same sound.

“Help!”

Mourg ignored *it*. He was vaporizing in his lower right quadrant, and an attempt at handling this one would only dissipate him further. He floated into a pocket and sucked deeply of vapor, till his lower right quadrant throbbed and he felt a tremor of guilt at his own gluttony. (How odd, Mourg jelled, that we use the term vapor for so many things: for life-essence, for the vanishment of the life-essence, for the newborn if columned, for braking, and for Thom...but he's a pain in the g. But it was an old jell, one Mourg had jelled many times before, and the relavator marked it in his log, penalizing Mourg for repetition. Mourg grew even more annoyed.)

“Unclean,” Mourg insulted the relavator, sending the impression through three warps and a pinking so it would not be logged against him.

Furiously annoyed now—both for the logging and for the necessity of guile—Mourg settled back inside the great blue egg with *that*. The *it* that was *that* was now all crimped up with *its* appendages wrapped around itself, twitching in a most unsightly manner. Mourg felt his gorge become buoyant. Fives, but *they* were uggie uggie ugly!

Girding himself, Mourg pflenged and became solid. The *it* gave a high-pitched sound and scuttled backward to the very wall of the egg, *its* round things in the top of *its* front bulging. As head of the division, Mourg was expected to deal with this sort of reaction. He had yearned all the best texts on the subject—Zitmowse on Instability In Solid And Gaseous Life-Forms, T-Shremp on Pflenging With Care, that

exomorph, what was his name, from 884 on Dealing With Others—and he considered himself rather an adept at getting the job done.

He assumed something like the shape of *it*.

*It* blubbered: apparently the shape was not close enough.

Mourg tried talking to *it* in *its* sounds. “Ik thik cleen beebay maykyoo uhlilmohr thik ik.” It didn’t work. *It* blubbered worse, a pink thing falling out of *its* sound-aperture and vibrating madly.

*It’s* unhinged, apparently, Mourg jelled. (He was not logged; the jell applied to repetitive work—all in the line of duty.)

Mourg removed the hair and the wheels, and *it* seemed to like the appearance better. Mourg riffled *its* memory-tracks and found the proper sound-patterns.

“Hey, guy, take it easy. Nobody’s going to hurt you.”

*That* settled down, stopped twitching, ceased whimpering, vibrated a good deal less. Colors came and went on *its* face, and Mourg, responding to the stimulus, flashed a few itself. *It* vomited.

Apparently *it* didn’t mind red or green or gold, but crem and bidny made *it* ill. Mourg ceased flashing. “Now don’t get all nervous again, guy. Everything’s fine.”

“Where am I?” *it* asked, softly. *Its* upper sound-aperture trembled.

“The egg,” Mourg said.

*It* drained a saline solution from *its* round things.

Mourg ascertained—through six affirming techniques—that *it* was unhappy at *its* environment. Mourg tried to make *it* a little more at ease. Mourg pflenged the egg, himself, and *that*.

Now it was a tall green jungle of stalks that rose up into the bright yellow sunlight. The balloon thing drifted down toward them. Mourg was squatter and naked. *It* was changed, too.

And *it* yelled and cried and flung *itself* about in a manner that made Mourg crosshatched and tepid. “Oh, come *on* now,” Mourg said with annoyance, “now you’re just being cranky, dammit!”

He dimmed it all, re-pflenged, and decided—as *that* would sound—to hell with it. Mourg pflenged the egg back.

It was going the way it always went with *these*. The division was littered with them, cluttered with them, festooned with them.

“Okay, okay,” Mourg sounded. He had dealt with *these* long enough to know *they* were only testy little babies. Give *them* what *they* needed, and *they* kept quiet, and went back and told all the others *they’d* done this or done that, had had such and such an experience.

Mourg had given *them* a lot of things.

Noses. Women. Fire. God. Thought. Reproductive organs. An apple. Wheels. Olih (though they still hadn’t figured out how to use it). Dogs. Numbers. Dreams. Fat. Safety pins. And he gave *this* what *it*

needed, and sent *it* back. With relief.

Then Mourg pflenged, vastened, thrillip'd, exhaled, carbed, moved, de-ligged, orkrorlened, adumbrated, extruded, drank deeply of vapor, and slid off through his own cryonic metabolism (very nearly like peristalsis) for a little sleep.

He was roused from his slumbers less than a nanosecond later by his superior, fraught with a polymorphic fixation, Sid, who screamed silently, invoking the wrath of Five, and other dires, demanding to know what Mourg had done with *that*.

Gave *it* what *it* needed, Mourg went blue and in.

And what was that, this time, Sid in'd.

*It* wanted the universe.

Sid did a thing that was like a shrug, and pflenged, leaving behind the comment, One of these days *they* are going to want something worthwhile.

Mourg tried to get back to sleep, but it was difficult. He kept wheeling back to Sid's comment, and decided finally that *they* could have the universe, silly thing really *wasn't* worth much. But what if *they* ever *did* wise up?

—Clarion State College, Clarion, PA, 1968



## THE PLACE WITH NO NAME

This is how legends are born.

Perhaps it was because Norman had never suffered from an excess of oily, curly hair that he had been unable to make it as a gigolo. Or as Norman had phrased it: “I can’t stand patent-leather on my hair or my feet.” So he had taken the easy way out: Norman Mogart had become a pimp.

Er, let’s make the semantics more palatable. (In an era of garbage collectors who are Sanitation Disposal Engineers, truck drivers who are Transportation Facilitation Executives, and janitors who are Housing Maintenance Overseers, a spade is seldom a spade, Black Panthers please note.) Norman Mogart was an Entertainment Liaison Agent.

Pfui. Norman was a pimp.

Currently marketing a saucy item titled Marlene—a seventeen-year-old Puerto Rican voluptuary with a childlike delight in the carnal act and an insatiable craving for Juicy Fruit gum—Norman was doing nicely. Succinctly put, Norman was doing just whiz-bang. His alpaca coat had a velvet collar; his Porsche had recently been re-bored; his Diners Club account was up to date; and his \$32-a-day habit was nicely in hand.

Norman Mogart was also an Artificial Stimulant Indoctrinaire.

Pfui. Norman was a junkie.

It is not true that cocaine addicts are more sensual than common garden-variety hopheads, vipers, stashhounds, potheads, speed freaks, crystal-spaceouts, pill-droppers, acid-heads or blastbabies. It’s just that coke hits like paresis after a while, and when a member of the opposite sex begins to put on (as they used to say around the Brill Building) “the bee,” the cocaine sniffer just doesn’t have the wherewithal to say no.

Consequently, when Marlene—live wire that she was—felt compelled to snuggle up to her entrepreneur, Norman was too weak with happy to resist. It was this inability—nay, rather this *elasticity* of moral fiber—on Norman’s part, that brought about his terrible trouble, and the sudden pinching need for the bread to get turned on with. Marlene chose to snuggle up under a bush in Brooklyn’s fabled Prospect Park, unfortunately, and it was one of New York’s Finest (not

to mention chicken-est) who felt honor-bound to bust her, chiefly because he had been called on the carpet only that morning by his Captain for having been caught catnapping (with pillow and alarm clock) in the rear of a police ambulance. The bust left Norman with not only his pants down, but his source of income cut off.

Three weeks and six hundred and seventy-two dollars later, Norman was out of money and out of dust. His connects smelled the nature of his impecunity and magically dried up. Norman was in a sorry way.

There comes a point in the downward slide of the human condition when a man ceases to be a man. He may still walk erect, but it is principally a matter of skeletal arrangement, not ethics. Norman had reached that point...and passed it: screaming. Like the Doppler effect of a train whistle as it fades past a fixed point. Norman was going insane. The hunger was no longer even localized; withdrawal was an entity in itself. It clung to him like dark mud, it filled his mouth with rust. In a movie theater where he had fled to catch a few moments of peace and Chaplin's *City Lights*, he smelled the sick sweat pungency of someone in the darkness tuning in on grass, and he wanted very much to puke. Instead, he lit his eighty-five-dollar GBD, the pipe Elyse had given him for his birthday, the year before she had gone off and married one of her tricks, a canning company executive from Steubenville, Ohio. The aromatic curlicues of tobacco blotted it out a trifle, and Norman was able to continue on his thorny path to furious darkness, unimpeded by the scents of lesser joys.

Inevitably, it came down to finding another hooker—for the ravishing Marlene had been sent to the Women's House of Detention at Sixth and Greenwich Avenues for a big one-twenty, it being her second bust. It came down to finding a new hooker, or boosting a drug store for its till and drug supplies. But: Norman was a Constitutionally Incapacitated Swashbuckler.

Pfui. Norman was a goddam coward.

As for the former solution, it was luck-out there, as well: there were no other girls on the turf worth handling. For in his own way, and in his own pattern, Norman was a dealer in quality goods. Cheap or tawdry merchandise was a stink in his nostrils, inevitably bringing on a loss of reputation. In Norman's line of work, either solution was written in the hieroglyphics of bankruptcy.

Thus, view Norman Mogart, hung between the torture posts of his limitations and his desires. Swinging gently in a breeze of desperation.

The only climate that could have forced Norman to do what he did.

He accosted the woman as she turned to lock her car. It had been

the only empty space on Hudson Street, and Norman had known if he lurked for only a few moments in the dark doorway of the Chinese hand laundry, someone coming home late to one of the apartment buildings on Christopher or Bleecker would pull into it. He had been in the doorway no more than five minutes when the woman pulled in, backed and filled, and cut the ignition.

As she emerged, and turned to lock the door, Norman struck. He had a short length of pipe in his topcoat pocket, and he came up on her silently, and jammed it into the small of her back. "A gun, lady."

The woman didn't react as Norman had expected. With one sweeping movement she spun on the toe of her right foot, brought her arm around and directed the muzzle of the "gun" to the side. In two seconds Norman Mogart was grappling with a woman who had taken a course in street self-defense at the West Side YMHA. Norman found himself lifted on a stout hip, slung into the car, and sliding down its side. Then the woman kicked him. It was a very professional kick. It caught Norman directly under the heart and sent slivers of black glass up through his body into his brain. The next part he remembered only dimly: he grabbed her leg, pulled it out from under her and she fell with her skirt up around her hips, and her coat up around her skirt. Then he beat her solidly seven or eight times in the face with the length of pipe.

When the glass had dissolved in his brain and body, he was sitting on the dirty bricks of Hudson Street, half on top of a mound of dead meat.

He was still sitting there, a few minutes later, not quite believing what he had done, when the prowling car's searchlight speared him.

Norman Mogart scrambled to his knees and scuttled around the car. He dropped the pipe—which was now sticky—and crouching low, ran for his life. He ran into a man coming out of a narrow doorway leading up to cold-water flats, and caromed off him. He threw the man away from him and ran up Hudson Street. He kept running, with the squad car behind him, siren shrieking, gumball machine flickering angry red, searchbeam jabbing for him. He ran into Jane Street and kept going till he found a doorway. He ducked into the doorway and ran up a flight of stairs. And another flight. And another. And then he climbed a ladder and came out through a trapdoor on the roof of a Greenwich Village tenement. It was a roof that locked with other roofs, and he fled across the roofs, catching himself in wash hung on poles-and-rope, and screamed because he didn't know what it was.

Then he found a fire escape, and clattered down the iron steps till he came to the drop-ladder, and it squeaked rustily, and he climbed down, dropping into another alley. Then he ran up another street, and

onto Seventh Avenue, and across Seventh Avenue, dodging between cars. Then he was on another street, and he walked with head bowed, hands in topcoat pockets, praying he had lost them.

Light pooled on the sidewalk, and he looked up.

The light came from a trip lamp in the window of the store, and the sign it illuminated said:

## ESCAPE INSIDE

Norman Mogart hesitated only a moment. He pulled open the door, and stepped into the shop. It was empty. There was a brown, leathery, wizened little man with pointed ears standing in the exact center of the empty shop.

Yes, the shop was one of those.

"You're early," said the little man.

Norman Mogart was suddenly frightened. There was the unmistakable rattle of lunacy in the little man's voice. He stared for a long moment, feeling his gorge rise. Then he turned and reached out for the doorknob, knowing it was just there, under his questing fingers. There was no door.

"You're almost ninety seconds early," the little man murmured. "We'll have to wait, or throw everything out of phase."

Norman Mogart backed up, kept backing up, backed through the space where the door should have been, the wall should have been, the sidewalk outside the shop should have been, the street should have been. They weren't there. He was still inside the shop, whose dimensions seemed to expand as he moved. "You better let me out of here, crazy old man," Norman said quaveringly.

"Ah. It's time." The little old man hurried toward Norman. Norman turned and ran. Across a faceless, empty plain of existence. He kept running. There were no rises, no dips, no features to the surrounding terrain. It was as though he were in some enormous television studio set of limbo, running and running across an empty plain.

Finally, he slipped, exhausted, to the floor of the shop, and the little old man scampered up to him. "Ah. Fine. Now it's time."

He sat down cross-legged before Norman Mogart. Norman noticed with some alarm that though the little old man was sitting in a lotus position, quite comfortably, there was almost a foot of empty air between his bottom and the floor. The little man was sitting on the air.

Norman shut his eyes tightly. The little old man began talking to Norman as though he had *just* entered the shop, not as though he had been ninety seconds early.

"Welcome, Mr. Mogart. So you want to escape. Well, that's what I

sell here. Escape. Inside.”

Norman opened his eyes.

“Who are you?”

“A humble shopkeeper.”

“No, c’mon now, who *are* you?”

“Well, if you press me...”

The little man shimmered, and changed form. Norman shrieked. The form shimmered again, became the little old man. “Will you settle for what I’m showing you?”

Norman bobbed his head eagerly.

“Ah. Well, then, *do* you or do you *not* wish to escape, Mr. Mogart? I can guarantee that if you refuse my offer, the police will apprehend you in a matter of minutes.”

Norman hesitated only a second, then nodded.

“Ah. Good. Then we have an arrangement. And, with all my heart, I thank you.” Norman had only a moment to consider the peculiar tone in the little old man’s voice.

Then he began to dissolve.

He looked down and saw his legs beginning to fade away. Slowly. Without pain. “Wait a second, wait hold it!” Norman implored. “Are you a demon? A devil, some kind of thing like that? Am I going to Hell? Hey, wait a minute, if I’m going to Hell, I shoulda made a bargain...what do *I* get?...Hey, hold on, I’m fading away...Are you a gnome or an elf, or what?...Hey, what are you...!?!”

All that were left in the shop were Norman’s eyes, his ears, his lower lip and a patch of hair. And even as these faded, the little old man said, “You can call me Simon.”

And then, like the Cheshire cat, Norman Mogart faded away completely, hallucinating for an instant that the little old man had added, “Or Peter. It doesn’t matter...”

At first, in that painful introductory moment upon returning to consciousness, Norman Mogart knew only that he was looking straight up. He was lying on his back, in a springy bed of some growth, the .30-06 Husqvarna still held at high-port across his chest and one shoulder—but he was flat-out on his back. As that first moment stretched like warm taffy, drawing itself out until it had become one minute or five or ten, strange thoughts faded away: thoughts of another life, of a pain that burned in him, a pain that was now gone, to be replaced by a pain of quite another sort, of a woman, of running, of a little man...of an image that faded faded faded away to be replaced by...what? His senses crept timorously back to him, each carrying an allotted burden of *new* memories, replacing those old ones, now fading and gone; depositing the new memories in suddenly cleared spaces, and they fit snugly, as though they belonged, settling

to rest in his mind.

He was staring straight up, through the interlaced boughs of half a dozen jacarandas, and while he lay there, senses settling carefully back in their niches, he dwelled on flesh that faded and how lovely the blossoms seemed.

Had it been night, in a cold place? Here it was day, and warm. So warm. Had it rained here? Yes.

It *had* been raining. Heavily, he supposed, for the ground on which he lay gave off a moist and repellent squishing when he moved; his clothes were soaked through to the skin; his hair lay matted along his forehead; the stock and barrel of the hunting rifle were beaded with rain that had clashed with cosmoline and encysted itself.

He realized, finally, that the knapsack was still in place on his back, that he must have fallen straight back when he collapsed, and that now it was a painful hump which forced him to lie in a tortured arched condition. He slipped sidewise, and received immediate ease from the pain.

Still he looked up, seeing the huge leafy fronds that had collected their water greedily, and seeing the strange birds that came to slake their thirst at those informal watering-places. One bird he saw...

He had never known it, true so true; he had hardly lent credence to the native stories: he had heard it was so, that there were jungle birds of brilliant plumage whose colors ran in the rain, but he had snickered at the thought. Very often, too often (and if *once* too often, then he was a fool on a fool's errand!), the natives were like children, much rather believing their fancy made-up tales than the truth. Yet here it was, above him, nonchalant, and here—in this wonderland that was certainly no Wonderland—it was true. So who were the children, after all?

He stared up at the wild-eyed huge-billed creature and saw its colors, like a Madras print, running, flowing, melding one into another, red and yellow and green. And he marveled.

Beside him, in the rain-swollen pool, the jacaranda blossoms clotted like sour flesh, sucking at the flow of clear water. *Cocaine? What did that mean? Not him, perhaps some other.*

Now he felt rested, and with the thought, as punctuation, the mad-eyed bird leapt howling into the slate sky. He rose awkwardly, steadying himself on this root, that bole, stiffly, shifting the rick-rack between his shoulder blades. He seemed to rise up and up, a scarecrow, an exceptionally thin man, until he stood unsteadily, staring at the world. Then he looked down, and his reflection, jigsawed by bright blossoms, looked back. He did not recognize himself for a long moment. The body seemed all wrong. He

remembered *another* body, in a cold place, and fear, and the hurt that lived in that other body...then he recognized himself.

He did not know how long he had lain there, the fever rising higher in him, then abating, then rising once more, a volcanic heat that rose and fell to no discernible rhythm...but the burns and sores were better this day. He felt he could go on alone without balming himself with herbs. (He had begun to suspect, in any case, that one of the herbs, he did not know which, was poisoning him further.) (There, *that* was a thought that belonged to this body, not the other.) (Yet the rifle had gotten no lighter: rueful thought.) (Cocaine?)

Before him, the jungle presented its unknown face, many-eyed, uncaring, but ready for him to take that first step away from this clearing, that rain-pool; it would sense the intrusion of this Norman Mogart who was nothing to that ageless green. (My name is Harry Timmons, Jr. My name is) Norman Mogart sighed.

And then, if he persisted, as the White Man always persists, unable to distinguish between folly and futility, the jungle would come for him with claw and tendril and the inhaled hacking cough of the swamp.

He was frightened by strangeness, both within him and around him. (God himself, he felt, would be frightened here!) But he knew that somewhere beyond the gray-green rotting carcass of this jungle, somewhere back where neither the peons nor the *Indios* would go, where they all feared a place, a Place With No Name, a place outside thought or memory, he would find the one he sought. He would find the fabled bringer of fire, the one still known as Prometheus, chained to his rock, his liver eaten out and rejuvenated. And that...*that* was enough to drive him on against fears a thousandfold more potent than this, merely terrifying, jungle. Or the strangeness within him.

He struck off, by the compass still south by southwest, machete and thick-soled boots beating a way for his long, wiry frame. In the chittering depths of that green denseness he seemed too slight, too terrified to find anything as great as that which he sought. His small blue eyes behind the wire-framed lenses of his glasses seemed so watery, so fragile, so astigmatic, they could never recognize grandeur, even if it were to present itself. But he was here, and he was moving, and somewhere behind these dew-cupping fronds, he would come to the legend-that-lived. He had to believe that, *keep* believing it.

It had not been an easy thing, this trek through the rain forest; the feverish drifting upon the waters of the mesa lake where the plane had crashed, killing the others instantly, spitting itself upon the drogued *fuienta*, plunging with a near-living gasp into the eroded bottom. He remembered with the delirium of heat and pain and the nausea of

water fever, finding the *piragua* floating on the edge of the lake. Half-drowned, he had plunged his body into the lean, fire-blackened slit and descended into the darkness of nonthinking. The water, lapping against the seamed side of the dugout, had lulled his muted consciousness. He had sought and found a euphoric state of nonfeeling like that proffered by the peyote of the *serpentes* who see the secret colors of God upon the wind and the night, melting into the chiaroscuro of the jungle night.

(But if he could remember all that, even through the delirium, why did his thoughts continue to scatter and fall past alien memories that he was this other, this small man on a brick street in the cold?)

He kept moving.

And what was it the *Indios* said about him? About Harry Tim—Norman Mogart? He had heard the story from them in a dozen accents. That he was mad to go to the Place With No Name. And what was it those superstitious wise ones said about...*him*? About the legend.

The first time it was among the *Cholos*, when he could barely find the breath to pursue such an impossible tale. Who else but Norman Mogart would have seen in the semblance of the snake totem the identity of the legends that found their way through the *Rig-Veda*, the *Osai nai Komata*? Who else? Why, even the twenty references in the *Heiji Monogatari*, that warrior epic of half a world away...all these fitted piece-by-piece to the final pattern.

Now, fevered, moving, skin mottled by the three varieties of diploid fungus so common to the tableland, he knew that his eyes would become the color of llama milk, and his ears become muffled to the sounds of the insinuating fronds in a matter of days; but in that time he might see the thing he had come to see, if it existed.

The *Cholos* had promised him—with fear—as had the *Zenos*—with ridicule—and the *Huilichachas*—with disbelief—that he would find Him. If he went where the colors of the *Yoatl* ran like paint, if he went seven times seven meters, there...trapped in the cleft of the living rock...He rested, eyes filled with the black tears of fever and pain.

It was not a vulture that assailed Him, of course. No vulture that tore at his vitals. This they told him. That was the Western version; the distorted version of the legend of the fire-bringer. Only He, Huipoclapiol, was the bringer not of fire, but of lies; not the searing brand of truth, but the greater revelation of falsehood, and for this his spleen was ripped from his quivering viscera by the mad-eyed *Yoatl*, whose plumage colors ran like rainbow blood over His brown, immortal body.

And now he had found the bleeding color-bird, and so he knew the



rest of it must be true.

Sunk within his own madness (how far into fire-dreams am I gone, he wondered, knowing only one out of six images was of the real world, all others products of the fever, the pain, even this other life I seem to have led, yet know I never led) he faintly heard the sound...a mad sound from beyond the green...

Eyes burning bright, he hacked through a cat's cradle of vines, found himself abruptly on a ridge, and looked down to see the sound and what made it. The dull, droning, faraway mad sound of living death. There went the wide brown swath, like an ocean breaker, a ribbon road of desolation and roiling, hungering tumult. The *marabunta*! The warrior ants, the hell-that-moves, the mouth that never knows filling, the army ants that sweep all before them until they inexplicably vanish back into the jungle to wait their time once more.

He stared down at them, far off, feeling a cold return to sanity. No man could look on the face of such total destruction and not burn away the fever of madness; so much death at once cannot be escaped, even by doorways that lead to delusion. For a very long time he stared down into the valley, watching the moving, always moving billion-legged worm that devoured the world as it went. Then, shivering with the knowing of how small he was, how easily this jungle could take him and kill him, he turned away, and sought again the safety of the jungle. The *marabunta* were moving in a line with him, away from him, but they were far off, they were no immediate threat. Merely a reminder (that indescribable sound still drifting back to him) that he was only alone, only a man, and there were greater gods awake in the land.

Had he not been hallucinating in blue and yellow, he would never have found the entrance to the Place With No Name.

The fever had gotten worse, the fungi that now matted his arms and legs seemed in a race with him, to establish sovereignty of his body before he found what he sought. His most paralyzing fear was of the fungus covering his eyes.

And then he began hallucinating, circles of light emanating from each leaf, from every mote of dust, from the sun, from each outcropping of rock. A million circles, pulsing in blue and yellow, filling his world with empty bubble shapes, through which he slogged, half-conscious. Then he came to a ring of low hills, there in the jungle, high atop the mesa. He started around the foothills, hoping for a break that would carry him through, in blue and yellow.

The passage was overgrown with foliage, and he would never have

seen it, had it *not* been radiating circles of light. It was, in fact, the only point in his vision that was clear. Almost like a pathway through his delirium. He cleared the vegetation with his machete, and pried away several jagged chunks of rock that had fallen to block the passage. It was quite dark inside.

Norman Mogart took a step inside, then another. Stood waiting. Heard silence. Drew breath. Stepped again. Walked forward with fear. With hope. Saw nothing. Hung his machete on his belt. Slung his rifle. Extended his hands. Felt the walls of the passage. Narrower. Wider. Moving forward. Deeper and deeper into the mountain. Farther.

Saw light far ahead. Hurried toward it. Marveled that the circles of light had left him. Came to the mouth of the passage. Stepped out. Saw Him.

Mogart was on a wide ledge that circled almost completely around the inside of the mountain. Below him, far below him, he could make out what had surely been the throat of what-was-now-obviously not a mountain but a dormant volcano. And all the way across the volcano, on the wide ledge directly across from him, Prometheus was chained to the rock.

Norman Mogart started around the ledge, keeping his eyes alternately on his destination, that incredible figure bent backward over the rock outcrop, and where his feet were placing themselves.

As he neared the figure, he began to realize that if it was a man, it was a man such as had never existed on this Earth. Prometheus was very brown, almost a walnut shade. His eyes, which were closed, were vertical slits. Around the mouth, which was little more than a horizontal gash running completely across the lower face, were tiny fleshy tendrils. They reminded Mogart of the spiny whiskers of a catfish. The tendrils moved in slight, quivering random patterns.

Prometheus was bent backward over a rock, arms spread and webbed-fingered hands (with more tendrils on the knuckles) pulled down on either side. Huge faceted bolts of a blue metal had been driven through the wrists, into the rock. A chain of the same metal circled the nipped-in waist and was itself bolted to the rock. Bolts had been driven through the flipper-like feet.

Even as he neared, a scream from the sky brought his eyes up, and he saw the *Yoatl* dive straight down, and with mad-eyed purpose it landed on the chest of the creature. (Mogart realized, suddenly, that this—man?—had altogether too many ribs in the huge chest.) The bird arched its neck and drove its beak into the walnut flesh. It came away red with blood, and Mogart could now make out the scar tissue that covered the body of the chained creature.

He yelled, then. As loud as he could. The bird gave him a quizzical

stare, then flapped away into the sky. At the sound of Mogart's voice, Prometheus raised his head and looked across the ledge.

He saw Mogart, moving toward him hurriedly.

Then he began to cry.

Mogart came to his side rapidly. He tried to speak, but he had no idea what to say.

Then the chained figure spoke. In a tongue Mogart could not understand.

"I don't know...what you're saying..."

The figure closed his eyes a moment, then mumbled something to himself, as though running through a litany of some sort, and finally said, "Your words. This is right."

"Yes. Yes, now I can understand...are you...?"

The man's face broke into a smile. A tortured, painful smile of relief and passion. "So the Justice finally sent you. My time is done. I'm very grateful to you."

Norman Mogart did not know what he meant.

"A moment," the figure said, and closed its eyes in concentration. "Now. Touch me."

Mogart hesitated. The mute appeal in the eyes of the walnut man urged him, and he reached out and touched the flesh of the chained man.

There was an instant of disorientation, and when he could focus again, he found himself alone on the ledge, now chained where the walnut figure had been. And he was alone. Quite alone. Chained in the place of Prometheus; himself having become the fire-bringer.

That night, after the *Yoatl* had come again and again to him, he had his first dream. A dream that lived in fire. And this was the dream:

They had been lovers. And from their love had come compassion. For the creatures of that primitive world. They had brought the fire of knowledge; against all the rules of the Justices they had interfered with the normal progress of another world. And so they had been sentenced. The one to a fate chained to a rock in a place no man would ever visit. The other to a public death.

They were immortal, so they would live forever and suffer forever. They radiated in a strange way, so the *Yoatl* came to feed, and to run like paint as a result.

But now their sentences were at an end.

So the Justice had selected two. One was even now exchanging places with the other, and Norman Mogart had taken the place of the one men had come to call Prometheus. Of the other...he had been an alien, even as Prometheus had been. He had brought the next step in

wisdom for the savages of this world. At the same time, though for the savages they were millions of years apart: for time had no meaning to these aliens.

Now, the lovers were freed. They would return and start again, for they had paid their penances.

Norman Mogart lay out on the rock, eyes closed, thinking of the two men who had loved each other, and him, and all the creatures of this world. He thought of them as they returned to *another* Place With No Name.

He thought of himself, and was in pain, and could not be entirely unhappy. How long it would last, he had no idea, but it was not a completely unsatisfactory way to mark out eternity.

And he thought of the man the Justice had found to take the place of that other, and he knew that when April came around again, he would be given his crown of thorns.

For that was how legends came to be born in the minds of savages, even in the Place With No Name.

—Cupertino, CA, 1964 and Los Angeles, 1968

## WHITE ON WHITE

He had wakened in the immense circular bed, feeling the satin sheets against his naked body. His face had been turned to the open French doors, and the first sight he had seen that morning was the vibrant Aegean, cerulean and mysterious, below the balcony of the villa. Then he had turned, and the Countess lay watching him from across the faraway expanse of too many years of high living. Her eyes, like the Sea, were cerulean and mysterious.

“What do I see in you?” she asked softly.

It was a question tinged with self-hatred and a grim realization that she was, inescapably, what she had allowed her hedonism to let her become. Paul sat up in bed, ruffling a hand through his blond hair. He gave her the rugged and knowing look—the one that had worked so well on the ex-wife of the deposed Southeast Asian premier—and answered her without words.

“You genuinely are a swine, Paul,” she said.

There was affection in her tone.

So he reached across, and paid his dues for that day, making ferocious love to her while his mind strayed in a waking dream: the same dream he had always dreamed. Of one woman, a constant woman, from whom he would never have to flee. Knowing all the while that his pattern—like hers—had been sternly and exquisitely set by too many years at the wrong trade.

And when he lay back again on his own side of the bed, looking out at the Sea and working the worm of the word *gigolo* through the under-layers of his mind, she said, “I’m sick of Greece. I want to go away.”

Paul slipped out of the bed and walked quickly onto the balcony. Where would it be this time? Paris; Côte d’Azur; Marrakech; Stowe, Vermont for the skiing? It didn’t matter. Wherever, it was with *whomever* and for *how long*, till the woman—whichever woman it was to which he’d attached himself—grew tired of him, snarled “ladies’ man” and threw him out. Somewhere, Paul knew, there was a woman, a special woman...one who would see beyond the hard, flat, tanned musculature to the soul he knew he possessed. However withered and atrophied it might be, still it was there, and one day, somewhere, he would find her, and she would keep him. Forever.

That day they left Athens and the villa.

The Countess had decided she needed adventure. Not riding to the hounds in Sussex, not tobogganing in the Swiss Alps, not stalking gazelle in Kenya; she had decided this time it was to be Nepal. Everest.

Not the highest summit, not even the southern face where the dilettantes used grapnel and piton to climb their easy climbs and return, winded, to armchairs in the club, where they could lie about their bravery. A foothill. Something wild and somewhat less than tortuous, where a Countess and her fancy man could taste the bite of the wind, trek the snow, and feel they had not been unplugged completely from life.

Their Sherpa was a withered old specimen, but adjudged honest to a fault and steadfast in the most harrowing circumstances. So they took him on, and began the climb.

But even sophisticated forays across the near edge of danger can go wrong, and somewhere beyond the fifth plateau the freak storm hit them, sending them deeper into their parkas, hurling a barrage of heavy snow against their snow-goggles, terrifying both the Countess and her tall, rugged Paul.

He dreamed of warmer climes, and knew when they got down from this insane coventry of white that he would be finished with her. Or her with him.

They made camp against the rock-wall of a modest outcropping, high up on the massif, the hide of the tent whistling and clapping around them as they huddled together and drank coffee from tin cups.

"This was stupid," he said.

"I *like* being stupid," she answered viciously. "I can afford all manner of stupidities."

It began the argument, and it spiraled up and up till he knew if he remained in the tent with her that when the Sherpa came to them from his own tent in the morning, she would be dead.

So he bundled tightly and stalked out onto the ledge, and followed it a few yards around the face of the massif. A few yards was all it took. He was immediately lost. The tents were gone in the frantic whiteness of the raging storm.

He felt terror rising in him, and for the first time realized precisely where he was, and what he was doing. He stumbled forward, hands out before him, trying to find at least the rock-wall, to follow it back. It, too, had vanished. Snow clotted his goggles, and he brushed them clean only to have them mass over again. He went to his knees, and had he known how to cry, he would have done so.

On hands and knees, he crawled.

For a very long time.

Then, through the sweeping gale he saw a break in the snow, a moment of lessened frenzy, and there was a cave. He pulled himself forward, and crawled into the shelter. The cave was not deep, but it was dark and it was protected. He lay up against the wall of the cave for moments, until he could regain his breath. Then he thumbed up the goggles and let the hood of the fur parka fall back from his head.

He looked around.

The cave was somehow very still, despite the epileptic writhing of the storm outside and its damned-soul shriek. In the far corner of the cave, something stirred. Paul blinked several times, the ice that had formed on his eyelashes weighing the lids. He could not make out what it was over there.

Then it rose.

He was incapable of screaming. The sound froze deep in his throat, even as the world around him froze.

The great white creature shambled toward him, and he could make out its form now. It was gigantic, fully eight feet tall, massive through the body, with legs as thick as tree trunks. Covered with silken white hair, a pelt of fur as deep and thick as a sheepskin rug. Where the face should have been, a travesty of humanity peered out through ingots of black fire. A nose more like that of an orangutan than a human. A mouth as wide as a gnome's. The creature stood over him, and Paul lay there paralyzed.

Then the thing stooped and gathered him up. It brought him close, and he could smell the awful stink of its breath. His mind fled from thinking of what it had been eating to smell like that.

Then it began to murmur. Deep sounds, musical sounds, warm sounds, from somewhere in its belly.

And with eyes that widened, then closed in a fear of encroaching insanity, Paul knew he had at last found the constant woman, the faithful woman, the one to whom he must belong, forever.

The creature was taken with him, and the sound of the Countess laughing *ladies' man* rang in his head. The *yeti* held him close, protecting him from the storm as they lumbered out of the cave, up the mountain and into the lost night of eternity.

The logic was inescapable: anthropologists should have suspected, should have known for a certainty: if there was such a thing as an Abominable Snowman...

He had been intuitively right. There *was* love eternal.

## RUN FOR THE STARS

### I

They found him looting what was left of the body of a fat shopkeeper. He was hunkered down with his back to the blasted store-front, picking through the hundred pockets of the dead merchant's work-bib.

He didn't hear them come in. The scream of the Kyban ships scorching the city's streets mingled too loudly with the screams of the dying.

They crept up behind him, three men with grimy faces and determined stares. The roar of a power terminal exploding somewhere across the city covered the crackle of their boots in the powdered and pebbled concrete that littered the floor. They stopped, and a man with blond hair nodded to the other two. They grabbed him suddenly, twisting his hands up behind his back, bringing a sharp, surprised scream from him.

Bills and change tinkled from his hands, scattered across the rubble-strewn floor.

Benno Tallant twisted his head painfully and looked up at the men holding him. "Lemme go! He was dead! I only wanted to get enough money to buy food with! Honest to God, lemme go!" Tears gathered in the corners of his eyes from the pains in his twisted arms.

One of the men holding him—a stocky, plump man of indeterminate age and a lisping speech said snappishly, "In case you hadn't noticed, lootie, this is a grocery you were robbing. There's food all over the shop. Why not use that?"

He gave the arm he held another half-twist.

Tallant bit his lip. There was no use arguing with these men; he couldn't tell them the money was to get narcotics. They would kill him and that would be the end of it. This was a time of war, the city was under siege from the Kyben, and they killed looters. Perhaps it was better that way; in death the insatiable craving for the dream-dust would stop, and he would be free. Even dead he would be free.

Free, to walk without the aid of the dream-dust; free, to lead a normal life. Yes, that was what he wanted, to be free...he would never touch the dream-dust again, if he came out of this alive.

And the pusher was probably dead, anyhow.

The thought of death—as it usually did—sent chills coursing down



through his legs, numbing his muscles. He sagged in their grip.

The pig-faced man, who had not spoken, grunted in disgust. "This the best we can do, for Christ's sake? There's *got* to be someone in the group better for this job. Look at the miserable little slob, he's practically jelly."

The blond man shook his head. He was obviously the leader of the group. A patch of high forehead was miraculously clean among the filth and grime of his skin; he rubbed his hand over his forehead now, blotting away the clean area. "No, Shep, I think this is our man."

He turned to Tallant, stooped down and studied the quaking looter. He put his hand to Tallant's right eye, and spread the lids. "A junkie. Perfect." He stood up, added, "We've been looking for you all day, fellah."

"I never saw you before in my life, what do you want with me? Lemme go, willya!" They were taking too long to kill him—something was wrong.

His voice was rising in pitch, almost hysterically. Sweat poured down over his face as though a stream had been opened at the hairline.

The tall, blond man spoke hurriedly, glancing over his shoulder. "Come on, let's get him out of here. We'll let Doc Budder go to work on him." He motioned them to lift the quaking man, and as he rose, added, "There's a good five hours' work there," and he patted Tallant's lean stomach.

The lisping man named Shep said, "And those yellow bastards up there may not give us that long."

The pig-faced man nodded agreement, and as though to punctuate their feelings, a woman's high-pitched scream struck through the fast-falling dusk. They stopped, and Tallant thought he might go mad, right there, right in their arms, because of the scream, and these men, and no dust, and the entire world shattering around him. He wanted very badly to lie down and shiver.

He tried to slump again, but the pig-faced man dragged him erect.

They made their way through the shop, kicking up fine clouds of concrete dust and stepping on bits of plasteel that crackled beneath their feet. They paused at the shambles of the storefront, and peered into the gathering darkness.

"It's going to be a rough four miles back," the lisping man said; and the tall, blond leader silently nodded agreement.

Outside, the explosion of a fuel reservoir superimposed itself over the constant blast and scream of Kyban attack...and the mere scream of human death.

The silence fell for an instant...the deadly silence of the battlefield

that only signifies new horrors preparing...then before the new breath could be drawn, a screaming missile whined overhead and ripped through the face of an apartment building across the street. Metalwork and concrete flew in all directions, shattering on the blasted pavement, sending bits of stuff cascading over them.

They watched with tight faces for an instant; then, hauling their human burden, slipped quietly and quickly into the evening.

Behind them, the fat shopkeeper lay amidst the debris of his store, dead, safe, and uncaring.

## II

Benno Tallant awoke during the operation, his throat burning with dryness, his head swimming in fatigue. He saw his stomach open, the bare organs—slick and wet in their own pulsing blood—staring up nakedly at him. A grizzled little man, with sharp spikes of white beard dotting his cheeks, was carefully settling a knobbed and calibrated block of metal into the flesh. He caught a glimpse of the operating lamp's idiot glare above him, and promptly fainted again.

When he awoke the second time, he was in a cold, cold room, lying naked to the groin on an operating table, his head slightly higher than his feet. The red, puckered scar that ran from the bottom of his rib cage to the inside of his thigh stared up at him. It reminded him of a crimson river coursing through desert land. The pin-head gleam of a metal wire-tip stuck up in the center of the scar. Abruptly, he remembered.

They stopped his screaming by forcing a wadded-up towel into his mouth.

The tall blond man from the ruined shop stepped into Tallant's arc of vision. He had washed the filth from his face, and he wore a dun-colored military uniform, with the triple studs of a Commander on the lapel. The man stared closely at Tallant for a moment, noting the riot of emotions washing the looter's face.

"I'm Parkhurst, fellow. Head of Resistance, now that the President and his staff are dead." He waited for the convulsions of Tallant's face to cease. They continued, the eyes growing larger, the skin turning red, the neck tendons stretching taut.

"We have use for you, mister, but there isn't much time left...so if you want to stay alive, calm down."

Tallant's face eased into quiet.

They pulled the towel from Benno Tallant's mouth and for a moment his tongue felt like thick, prickly soup. The picture of his stomach, split and wet, came back to him once more. "*What was that?* What have you done to me? Why do this to me?" He was crying; the

tears oozed out of the corners of his eyes, running ziggily down his cheeks into the corners of his mouth, and down his chin again.

"I wonder that, too," said a voice from Tallant's left. He turned his head painfully, small shafts of pain hitting him at the base of the neck. He saw the grizzled man with the spiky beard. It was a doctor; the doctor who had been inserting the metal square in Tallant's stomach the first time he had awakened. Tallant assumed this was Doc Budder.

The nearly bald man continued, "Why this sniveling garbage, Parkhurst? There are a dozen men left in the post who would've volunteered. We would have lost a good man, but at least we'd know the thing was being carried by someone who could do the job."

He caught his breath as he finished speaking; a thick, phlegmy cough made him steady himself on the edge of the operating table. "Too many cigarettes..." he managed to gasp, as Parkhurst helped him to a chair across the room.

Parkhurst shook his head and pointed at Tallant. "The best possible job can be done by somebody who's afraid of the thing. By someone who will run. The running will take time, and that's all that will be left to ensure our living till we get to Earth, or another outpost. What do you think, Doc?

"Do you have any doubt this man will run?"

Doc Budder rubbed the bristling stubble on his chin. It rasped in the silence of the room. "Mmm. I guess you're right, Parkhurst—you usually *are*—it's just that..."

Parkhurst cut him off with friendly impatience. "Never mind, Doc. How soon can we have this one up and around?"

Doc Budder wheezingly hoisted himself from the chair. He coughed once more, deeply, said, "I had the epidermizer on him...he's knitting nicely. I'll put it back on him but, uh, say, Parkhurst, y'know, all those cigarettes, my nerves are a little jumpy...I wonder, uh, would you have a little, uh, something to sort of steady me?" A hopeful gleam appeared in the old man's eyes, and Tallant recognized it at once for what it really was. The old man was a junkie, too. Or a winehead. He couldn't name the specific poison, but there was the same unnatural craving eating at Doc Budder that he suddenly realized was eating at him, also.

Parkhurst shook his head firmly. "Nothing, Doc. We have to keep you right on hand in case something goes..."

"Goddam it, Parkhurst, I'm not a ward of the state! I'm a doctor, and I have a right to—"

Parkhurst turned away from staring at Tallant, staring at Tallant but thinking of Doc Budder. "Look, Doc. This is a bad time for everybody. This is rough on all of us, Doc, but my wife got burned

down in the street when the Kyben struck three days ago, and my kids were burned in the school. Now I know it's rough on you, Doc, but if you don't so help me God stop bugging me for your whiskey, I'm going to kill you, Doc. I'm going to kill you."

He had spoken softly, pacing his words for full effect and clear understanding, but the desperation in his voice was apparent. The tones of a man with a terrible anguish in him, and a terrible burden on his shoulders. He would not humor the old man any longer.

"Now. How soon can we get him out of here, Doc?"

Doc Budder's eyes swept across the room hopelessly, and his tongue washed his lips. He spoke hurriedly, nervously.

"I'll—I'll put the epidermizer back on it. It should be set in another four hours. There's no weight on the organs; it was a clean insertion. He shouldn't feel a thing."

Benno listened closely. He still didn't know what had been done to him, what the operation had been about, and his overwhelming terror at this whole affair had been sublimated in the little tableau between Budder and Parkhurst. But now he ran a shaking hand over the scar.

The fear was gagging him, and he felt the nervous tics starting in his inner upper arm and his cheek. Doc Budder wheeled a slim, tentacled machine to the operating table, and lifted a telescoping arm from the shaft. On the end was a small rectangular nickel-steel box with a small hole in it. Budder threw a switch, and a shaft of light struck out from the hole, washed the scar.

Even as he watched, the wound seemed to lose color, pucker more. He couldn't feel the thing they had put in his stomach, but he knew it was there.

A sudden cramp hit him.

He cried in pain.

Parkhurst's face turned white. "What's the matter with him?"

The words came out so quickly, they were one word.

Doc Budder pushed aside the telescoping arm of the epidermizer, leaned over Tallant, who lay there breathing with difficulty, his face wrenched into an expression of utter pain. "What's the matter?"

"It hurts—it—*here*—" He indicated his stomach. "Pain, all over here, hurts like hell...*do something!*"

The fat little doctor stepped back with a sigh. He slapped the telescoping arm back into position with a careless motion. "It's all right. Self-induced cramp. I didn't think there'd be any deleterious after-effects.

"But," he added, with a malicious glance at Parkhurst, "I'm not as good a doctor, as sober and upstanding a doctor, as the Resistance could use, if it had its choice, so you never know."

Parkhurst waved a hand in annoyance. "Oh, shut up, Doc."

Doc Budder pulled the sheet up over Tallant's chest, and the looter whined in pain. Budder snarled down at him. "Shut up that goddammed whining, you miserable slug. The machine's healing you through the sheet. You haven't got a thing to worry about...right now. There are women and kids out there..." he waved toward the boarded-up window "...suffering a lot worse than you!"

He turned toward the door, Parkhurst following, lines of thought slicing across the blond man's forehead.

Parkhurst stopped with a hand on the knob. "We'll be back with food for you later." He turned back to the door, then added, not looking at Tallant, "Don't try to get out. Aside from the fact that there's a guard on the door—and that's the only way out unless you want to go to *them* through the window—aside from that, you might open that incision and bleed to death before we could find you."

He clicked the light switch, stepped out, and closed the door behind himself. Tallant heard voices outside the door, softly, as though coming through a blanket of moss, and he knew the guard was standing ready outside.

Tallant's thoughts weren't deterred by the darkness. He remembered the dream-dust, and the pains shot up in him again; he remembered the past, and his mouth chocked up; he remembered awakening during the operation, and he wanted to scream. The darkness did not interfere with Benno Tallant's thoughts.

They became luminous and the next six hours were a bright, thinking hell.

### III

The lisping man, Shep, came for him. He had cleaned up, also, but there were fine tracings of dirt around his nose, and under his nails, and in the lines of pocketing beneath his eyes. He had one thing in common with the other men Tallant had seen; he was weary, to the core.

Shep shot the telescoping arm of the epidermizer into its shank hole, and rolled the machine back against the wall. Tallant watched him carefully, and when Shep turned down the sheet, examining the now-gone thin, white line that had been the incision, Benno raised himself on his elbows, and asked, "How's it going outside?" His tones were friendly, the way a child trying to make up to someone who has been angry with him is friendly.

Shep raised his gray eyes and did not answer.

He left the room, reappeared a few minutes later with a bundle of clothes. He threw them on the operating table next to Tallant, and helped the looter sit up. "Get dressed," he said shortly.

Tallant sat up, and for a moment the crawling of his belly-hunger for the dream-dust made him gag. He hung his head down and opened his mouth, making retching noises deep in his throat. But he was nausea-dry, and nothing came.

He straightened up and put a shaking hand through his brown hair. "L-listen," he began, speaking confidentially to the Resistance man, "do y-you know where I can lay my hands on some dream-dust? I-I can make it worth your while, I've got—"

Shep turned on him, and the lisping man's hand slammed against Tallant's face, leaving a burning red mark. "No, mister, *you* listen to *me*. In case you don't know it, there's a Kyban battle armada on its way across space, headed directly for Deald's World. We've only been hit by an advance scout party, and they've nearly demolished the planet as it is.

"About two million people are dead out there, buddy. Do you know how many people that is? That's almost the entire population of this planet.

"And you sit there asking me to get you your snuff!

"If I had any say in the matter, I'd kick you to death right here, right now.

"Now you get into those goddammed clothes, and don't say another word to me, or so help me bleeding Jesus I'm not responsible for what happens to you!"

He turned away, and Tallant stared after him. There was no fight in him, merely a desire to lie down and cry. Why was this happening to him? He'd try anything to get the dust now...it was getting bad inside him...real bad...and he'd tried to stay out of the fighting...he'd only been getting the money from that shop to find a pusher...why were they badgering him...what had they *done* to him?

"*Get dressed!*" Shep shouted, the cords in his neck tightening, his face screwing into an expression of rage.

Tallant hurriedly slipped into the jumper and hood, the boots, and buckled the belt around himself.

"Come on." Shep prodded him off the table.

Tallant stood up, nearly fell; he clung to Shep in terror, feeling the unsteadiness washing through him.

Shep shrugged his hands off, commanded, "Walk, you slimy, yellow bastard! *Walk!*"

He walked, and they went down the hall, into another sealed-tight compartment, and Tallant realized they must be underground.

He walked slightly behind Shep, knowing there was no place else to go, and the lisping man seemed to pay him no attention; knowing the looter would follow.

Through the walls—and through the very ground, Tallant estimated—he could hear the reverberations of shock bombs hitting the planet. He knew only vaguely what was happening.

The Earth-Kyban War had been a long and costly battle—they had been fighting for sixteen years—but this was the first time a Kyban fleet had broken through this far into the Terran dominion.

But it had obviously been a sudden, sneak attack, and Deald's World was the first planet to be hit. He had seen the devastation, while aboveground, and he knew that if these men were alive and working to defend Deald's World, they were the last pocket of the Resistance left.

But what did they want with him?

Shep turned right down a corridor, and palmed a loktite open. He stepped aside and Tallant walked into what appeared to be a communications room.

High banks of dials and switches, tubes and speaker rigs covered the walls. Parkhurst was there, holding a hand-mike carelessly, talking to a technician.

The blond man turned as Tallant stepped through. He nodded to himself, as though setting everything right in his mind, as though satisfied that all was going as planned, now that the looter was here. "We thought you'd like to know what this is all about." He hesitated. "We owe you that, at any rate."

The technician waved his hand in a circle, one finger extended, indicating they had started something turning, perhaps indicating the batteries were being warmed.

Parkhurst pursed his lips for a moment, then said almost apologetically, "We don't hate you, fellow." Tallant realized that they had not even bothered to find out his name yet. "We have a job to do," Parkhurst continued, half-watching Tallant, half-watching the technician, "and more is at stake than you or me or the life of anyone left here on Deald's World. Much more.

"We had a job to do, and for the job we needed a certain type of man. You fit the bill so beautifully, you'll never quite know. There was no premeditation; it just happened to be you. If it hadn't been you, it would have been someone *like* you." He shrugged with finality.

Tallant felt the shivers beginning. He stood quaking, wishing he had just a sniff of the dust, just a miserable sniff. He wasn't interested in all this high-flown patriotic gabble Parkhurst was throwing at him; all he wanted was to be let alone, let back out there, even if the Kyben *were* burning the planet, just to get back out there. Perhaps he could find a cache of the dust...because he knew he wouldn't get it from these men. If Doc Budder couldn't get his hootch, then they wouldn't

give Tallant any dream-dust.

Yes, that was it. He knew it now. It was a plot, a conspiracy to keep him from his beloved dust. He had to have it, he was *going* to have it—but he would wait, he would be sly and cautious, and wait till these madmen were out of the way, till they weren't watching, then he would get away. There were no Kyben aboveground, it was only a foul, despicable plot to keep him from his beloved dust. His eyes narrowed.

Then the memory of the metal thing in his stomach jerked him instantly to reality. Tallant stood quaking. He had still not gotten over his terror at seeing the metal thing placed in his stomach.

His sallow face was dotted with sweat and streaked with dirt, though they had washed him several times during the six hours it had taken the scar to heal.

He was a lean man; the gray tuberous sort of man who always brings the wolf or pack-rat to mind. Brown hair and small, deep-set eyes. A face that seemed to taper to a rodent-like tip.

"What—what are you going to do with me now?" He touched himself lightly, almost fearfully, on the stomach. "What is that thing you did to me?"

A high, keening whine broke from one of the many speakers on the wall, and the tight-lipped technician gestured wildly at Parkhurst, finally tapping him on the shoulder. Parkhurst turned to the technician, and the man gave him a go-ahead signal. Parkhurst motioned Tallant to silence, motioned Shep to stand close by the shaking looter.

Then he spoke into the hand-mike. A bit too clearly, a bit too loudly, as though he were speaking to someone a great distance away, as though he wanted every word precise and easily understood.

"This is the headquarters of Resistance on Deald's World. We are subjects of Earth, and we are speaking to the Kyban fleet.

"Are you listening? This call is being broadcast over all tight beams, so we are certain you receive us. We'll wait ten minutes for you to rig up a translator and to hook in with your superiors, so they can hear this announcement.

"This is of vital importance to you Kyban, so we suggest as soon as you've translated what I've just said, you make the proper arrangements, and contact your officers."

He signaled the technician to cut off.

Then Parkhurst once again turned to Tallant. "They'll translate. They'll have to...they knew the best way to attack, so they must have had contact with Earth Traders, or Terran ships that went too far into the Coalsack. They will be able to decipher us."

Tallant ran a thin hand up his neck. "What are you going to do



with me? What are you going to do?" He felt hysteria building in him, but could not stop the flow of words. *He was afraid!* "This isn't fair! You've got to tell me!" His voice became shrill. Shep moved in closer behind him, clasped the looter's arm above the elbow. Tallant stopped just as another torrent of words was about to burst forth.

Parkhurst spoke unhurriedly, quietly, trying to calm Tallant. "This is the advance guard of a gigantic Kyban fleet, mister. We're sure of that because there are almost fifty ships in the force that attacked us. If that's what they are using for an advance scout, the fleet must be the largest assembled during the War.

"It's obvious they intend to crush right through, the sheer force of weight breaking through all the Earth defenses, and perhaps strike at Earth itself.

"This is the big push of the War for the Kyben, and there is no way to get word to Earth. Our inverspace transmitters went when they burned down the transpoles at the meridian. There's no way to warn the home planet. They're defenseless if all the outer colonies go—as they surely will if this fleet gets through.

"We've got to warn Earth. And the only way we can do it, and with luck save the lives of the few thousands left alive on Deald's World, is to stall for time. That's why we needed a man like you. You."

Then he fell silent, and they waited silently.

The only sounds in the room were the click and whisper of the blank-faced machines, the tight, sobbing breaths of Benno Tallant.

Finally the big wall-chronometer had ticked away ten minutes, and the technician signaled Parkhurst once more.

The blond man took up the hand-mike again, and began speaking quietly, earnestly, knowing he was no longer dealing with subordinates, but the men in power up there above the planet; speaking as though each word were the vital key to a great secret.

"We have placed a bomb on this planet. A sun-bomb. I'm sure you know what that means. The entire atmosphere will heat, right up to the top layers of the stratosphere. Not quite enough to turn this world into a nova, but well enough above the point where every living thing will perish, every bit of metal heat to incandescence, the ground scorched through till nothing can ever grow again. This world, all of us, all of *you*, will die.

"Most of your fifty ships have landed. The few that remain in the sky can not hope to escape the effects of this bomb, even if they leave now. And if they do—you are being tracked by radar—we will set the bomb off without a moment's hesitation. If you wait, there is another possibility open to you."

He tossed a glance at the technician, whose eyes were fixed on a bank of radar screens with one pip in the center of each. The technician shook his head, and Tallant realized they were waiting to see if their story was accepted. If one of those pips moved out away from the planet, it would mean the Kyben did not believe, or thought it was a bluff.

But the Kyben obviously could not chance it. The pips remained solidly fastened to the center of the screens.

Then Tallant's eyes suddenly widened. What Parkhurst had said was finally penetrating. He *knew* what the blond man meant! He *knew* where that bomb was hidden. He started to scream, but Shep's hand was over his mouth before the sound could escape, could go out over the transmitter to the Kyben.

He became violently ill. Shep drew away from him, cursing softly, pulling a rag from a console top to wipe himself off. Tallant continued to vomit in dry, wracking heaves, and Shep moved back swiftly to catch him as he fell.

The lisping man eased Tallant onto a console bench, and continued daubing at his spattered uniform.

Tallant knew he was on the verge of madness.

He had lived by his wits all his life, and it had always been the little inch someone would allow him that had afforded the miles he had attained. But there was no inch this time. Bewildered, he realized he could not take advantage of the weakness or the politeness of these men, as he had taken advantage of so many others. These men were hard, and ruthless, and they had planted a sun-bomb—My God In Heaven!—a *sun*-bomb in his stomach!

He had once seen stereotypes of a sun-bomb explosion.

He threw up again, this time falling to the floor.

Through a fog he heard Parkhurst continue: "We repeat, don't try to take off. If we see one of your ships begin to blast, we'll trigger the bomb. We give you one alternative to total destruction. To destruction of this planet you will need so desperately for storage, refueling and supply for your fleet. One alternative."

He paused, looked around the communications room, which had suddenly seemed to grow so crowded. He seemed a bit embarrassed, perhaps by the obvious histrionics of the tense situation. Parkhurst licked his lips and went on carefully, "Let us go. Let the Earthmen on this planet blast away, and we promise not to set off the bomb. After we have left the atmosphere, we will set the bomb on automatic, and leave it for you to find yourselves. If you doubt we have actually done as I say, take a stabilization count with whatever instruments you have to detect neutrino emission.

"That should convince you instantly that *this is no bluff!*

"We will tell you this, however. There is one way the bomb may be deactivated. You can find it in time, but not till we have gotten away. It is a gamble you will have to take. The other way...there is no gamble at all. Only death.

"If you don't comply, we set off the bomb. If you do accede to our demands, we will leave at once, and the bomb will be set to automatic, and will go off at a designated time. It's armed with a foolproof time-device, and it can't be contained by any neutrino-dampers.

"That is our conditioned demand. We'll wait for your answer no more than an hour. At the end of that time, we trigger the bomb, even if we are to die!

"You can reach us over the band on which you are receiving this message."

He motioned to the technician, who threw a switch. A bank of lights went dark, and the transmitter was dead.

Parkhurst turned to Tallant, lying shivering in his own filth. His eyes were very sad, and very tired. He had to say something, and it was obvious what he said would be cruel, terrifying.

*Don't let him say it, don't let him say it, don't let him say it*, Benno Tallant kept repeating in the maddened confines of his mind. He screwed his eyes shut, put his slippery fists to them to ensure the darkness, perhaps blotting out what Parkhurst would say.

But the blond man spoke.

"Of course," he said quietly, "that end of it *may* be a bluff. I may be lying. There may *not* be any way to damp that bomb. Even after they find it."

#### IV

Tallant had been in such bad shape, they had had to lock him in the operating room, after removing everything breakable. Shep had been for strapping Tallant to the table, but Parkhurst and the pig-faced man—an ex-baker turned sniper named Banneman—were against it.

They left Benno Tallant in the room, while the hour elastically drew itself out. Finally, Shep palmed the loktite open and came in to find the looter lying on his side in the room, his legs drawn up near his chest, his hands down over his knees, the wide, dark eyes staring unseeingly at the limp, relaxed fingers.

He drew a pitcherful of water from a tap in the next room, and threw it on Tallant's face. The looter came out of his almost trancelike state with a wail and a start. He looked up, and memories flooded

back at once. And the dust hunger.

“J-just a sniff...just a s-sniff is all I want...*please!*”

Shep stared at the weakling with a mixture of disgust and livid hopelessness. “This is the savior of Earth!” He spat on the floor.

Tallant’s guts were untwisting. His mouth was dry then foully wet then dry again. His head ached and his muscles were constricted. He wanted that dust more than anything, he *had* to have it. They had to *help* him. He whined, and crawled toward Shep’s boots.

The lisping man drew back. “Get on your feet. They expect the answer any minute.”

Tallant got to his feet painfully, steadying himself on the operating table. They had the table bolted to the floor, but he had managed to bend two of its legs in his frantic, screaming drive to get out, to get to the dust.

“Come on,” Shep said.

Shep led the shivering, drooling Tallant to the communications room once more, and when Parkhurst saw the state of disintegration coming over Tallant, he spoke quietly to Doc Budder. The spike-chinned old man nodded, and slipped past Tallant, out the door. Tallant stared around the room with blank eyes, till Doc Budder came back.

The old man held a snow-white packet, and Tallant recognized it for what it was. Dream-dust. “Gimme, gimme, gimme, please, ya gotta give it to me, give it, give me...”

He extended shaking, pale hands, and his twitching fingers sought the packet. Doc Budder, recognizing another addict was getting his craving, while *he* suffered without his own poison, held the packet back, taunting Tallant for a moment.

The addict struggled toward the old man, almost fell on him, his breath ragged and drool slipping out of his mouth. “Gimme, gimme, gimme, gimme...” His voice was a whisper, fervent, pleading.

The Doc laughed shrilly, enjoying the game, but Parkhurst snapped, “Let him alone, Doc. I said let him have his dope!”

The Doc threw the packet to the floor, and Tallant was on hands and knees in an instant, scrabbling for it. He had it in his hands, and he ripped the packet open with his teeth.

He struggled across the floor on his knees, to the comm-console and ripped a piece of paper from a pad. He folded it one time, and let the white dream-dust filter out of the packet, into the trough of paper.

Then he turned to the wall, crouching down so they could not see what he was doing, and inhaled the dust through each nostril.

Even as the dust slid up his nasal passages, the hunger died, the strength returned to him, the pressure eased from the base of his skull,

his hands stopped trembling.

When he turned back he was no longer a shambles.

He was only a coward.

“How much longer?” Banneman asked from across the room, carefully keeping his eyes from Tallant.

“Any minute now,” the technician answered from behind his commask. And as though his words had been a signal, the squawkboxes made a static sound, and the rasp of a translating machine broke the silence of the room.

It was in a cold, metallic voice, product of changing Kyban to English.

“We accept. You have the bomb, as our instruments indicate, so we allow you seven hours to load and leave.” That was the message, that was all.

But Tallant’s heart dropped in his body. If the alien instruments showed an increase in neutrino emission, it could only mean his last hope was gone. The Resistance *did* have the bomb, and he knew where it was.

He was a walking bomb. He was walking death!

“Let’s get moving,” Parkhurst said, and started toward the corridor.

“What about me?” Tallant’s voice rose again and he grasped at Parkhurst’s sleeve. “Now that they’ll let us go, you don’t need me any more, do you? You can take that—that *thing* out of me!”

Parkhurst looked at Tallant wearily, an edge of sadness in his eyes. “Take care of him, Shep. We’ll need him, seven hours from now.” And he was gone.

Tallant remained with Shep, as the others left. He turned to the lispng man, and cried out, “What? Tell me! What?”

Then Shep explained it all to Tallant.

“You’re going to be the last man on Deald’s World. Those Kyban have tracing machines to circle down on centers of neutrino emission. They would find it in a moment if it were in one place. But a moving human being isn’t always in one place. They’ll never suspect it’s in a human being.

“They’ll think we’re all gone. But you’ll still be here, with the bomb. You’re our insurance policy.

“Parkhurst controls the bomb as long as he’s on the planet, and it won’t go off. But as soon as he leaves, he sets it on automatic, and it goes off in the time allotted to it.

“That way, if an alien ship tries to follow us, tries to take off, the bomb explodes. If they *don’t* take off, and don’t find it in time, it goes off anyhow.”

He was so cool in explaining, so uncaring that he was condemning

Tallant to death, that Benno Tallant felt the strength of his dream-dust rising in him, felt anguish and fury at being used as a dupe and a walking bomb.

"What if I just turn myself in to them and let them cut it out with surgery, the same way you put it in?" Tallant said snappishly, with momentary bravery.

"You won't," Shep answered smugly.

"Why not?"

"Because they won't bother being as gentle as we were. The first detachment of Kyban foot-soldiers that trace the bomb to you will pin you to the ground and let an attaché slice you open."

He watched the horror that passed across Tallant's face. "You see, the longer you keep running, the longer it takes them to find you. And the longer it takes them to find you, the better chance we have of getting back to warn Earth. So we had to pick a man who was so stinking cowardly, he would keep running...because his whole nature depended on running...on staying alive.

"No, you'll keep running, fellow. That's why Parkhurst picked you. You'll run, mister, and never stop!"

Tallant drew himself up, and *screamed*, "My name is Tallant. Benno Tallant. Do you understand I have a name! I'm Tallant, Benno, Benno, Benno, Tallant!"

Shep grinned nastily and slumped down on the console bench. "I don't give a flying damn *what* your name is, fellow. Why do you think we never asked you your name?"

"Without a name, you'll be all the easier to forget. This isn't an easy thing to do—for Parkhurst and the others—they have feelings and scruples about you, fellow.

"But I don't. A dream-duster just like you assaulted my wife before—before—" He stopped, and his eyes raised to the ceiling. Aboveground, the Kyben sat, waiting. "So I sort of figure it all evens out. I don't mind seeing a dustie like you die, at all. Not at all."

Tallant made a break for the door, then, but Shep had his rifle up, and a sharp crack slammed it into the small of Benno Tallant's back. The looter slumped to the floor, writhing in pain, crying out.

Shep slipped back to his seat.

"Now we'll just wait about seven hours," he said quietly. "Then you become real valuable, fellow. Real valuable. Y'know, you've got the life of the Kyban fleet in your belly."

He laughed, and laughed some more, and Benno Tallant thought he would go mad from the sounds of underground laughter. He just wanted to lie down. And die.

But that would come later.

The rocket field was silent at last. The noise of loading the few remaining thousands of Dealders had crashed back and forth for seven hours, and the ships had gone up in great clouds of fumes and exhaust trailings. Now the last ship was finished, and Benno Tallant watched as Parkhurst lifted the little girl. She was a tiny girl with yellow braids, and she clutched a plastic toy. Parkhurst held her an instant longer than necessary, staring at her face, and Tallant saw compassion and sorrow for his own dead children coursing across the blond man's face. But he felt no sympathy for Parkhurst.

They were leaving him here to die in the most frightening way possible.

Parkhurst hoisted the little girl, set her inside the ship's plug-port, where the other hands received her. He began to swing up himself.

He paused with one hand on the swing-rail. He turned and looked at Tallant, standing with shaking hands at his sides, like a lost dog, pleading not to be left behind.

It was difficult for him, Tallant could tell. The man was not a murderer; he felt this was the only possible solution to the problem.

He had to warn Earth. But Tallant could feel no companionship. My God! They were condemning him to turn into a sun...

"Look, mister, it's like this. We're not as stupid as the Kyben think. They assume we'll blast and leave the bomb here. We'll be in our pokey little ships, they'll find and damp the bomb, then take off and wipe us out somewhere in space. All canned and ready to be burned.

"But they're wrong, Tallant. We made sure they wouldn't find that bomb.

"In time, with their neutrino-detectors, they could get the sun-bomb. But not if the carrier is moving. We *had* to find a man like you, Tallant. A coward, a runner.

"You're the only assurance we have that we'll make it to an Earth outpost to warn the mother world. I—I can't say anything to you that will make you think any better of us; don't you think I've burned over and over in my mind for what I'm doing? Get that look off your face, and say something!"

Tallant stared silently ahead, the fear draining down and around in him like poison rotting his legs.

"Somehow, even though I know you'll die, and I know I'm sentencing you to death, I look on you with pride. Can you understand anything as strange as that, mister? Can you understand that even though I've used the life in you the way I'd use the power of a robot-truck, I'm prideful because I *know* you'll keep them away from you for a long, long time, and I will be able to save these few people left, save

the Earth.

“Can you understand that?”

Tallant broke. He grabbed Parkhurst’s sleeve. “Oh, please, please, in the name of God, take me with you! Don’t leave me here! I’ll die... I’ll...die...”

Parkhurst firmly disengaged Tallant’s hand, his face tense.

Tallant fell back. “But why? Why do you hate me? Why do you want me to die?” Sobs caught in the looter’s throat.

The Resistance leader’s face became grim. “No, don’t *think* that! Please, don’t think that! I didn’t even know you when we found we needed a man like you for this, mister. I hate your type, that’s true, but there’s no reason for me to hate *you*!

“You’re a hero, mister. When—if—we get through this, a monument will be set up for you. It’s no good, and it won’t help you, but it will be set up.

“In the past seven hours I’ve schooled myself to despise you. I have to, mister, or I’d never leave you here. I’d stay in your stead, but that wouldn’t do any good. I wouldn’t have the same desire to run. I’m tired; my wife, my kids, they’re all dead. *I* want to die, I just want to die. But, but, *you*—you want to live, and you’ll run till they can’t find you, and that will give us the time we need!

“I’ve taught myself to think of you as some sort of refuse of the human race.

“And,” he added, in lost frantic justification, “you’ve helped me think of you that way. Look at yourself!”

Tallant knew what Parkhurst meant. He *was* garbage, he *was* a coward, he *would* run. He could almost picture his own slight body shaking as though under an ague, the sweat rolling off him, the fear a live thing around his body, his eyes large and white-ringed as they looked for a way out. Tallant knew he was a coward. It didn’t help any.

He didn’t want to die like this!

“So,” Parkhurst finished, “I hate you because I *have* to hate you, mister. And because I hate you, because I hate myself, and *not* you, I’ve done this to you. And because you are what you are, you’ll run and hide from those Kyban so that we can get to a relay station, and warn Earth they’re coming.”

He began to swing up into the ship again, when Tallant once more clutched his arm.

The coward had pleaded all through these last hours, and even now he knew no other way. A lifetime of sowing had reaped for him a harvest of spinelessness.

“At least, at least tell me, is there a way to damp the bomb. Can it



be done? You told *them* that it could!" The childish eagerness of his expression caused Parkhurst's face to wrinkle with disgust.

"There isn't a bone in your body, is there?"

"Answer me! *Tell me!*" Tallant shouted. Faces appeared whitely at the ports of the spaceship.

"I can't tell you, mister. If there were, if you knew for certain, you'd be off to the Kyban lines right now. But if you think it'll go off when they touch it, you'll wait a long time." He shook the man's hand loose and pulled himself up into the ship.

The port began to slide home, and Parkhurst stopped it for a second, his voice softening as he said:

"I know you. Goodbye, Benno Tallant. I wish I could say God bless you."

The port slid shut. Tallant could hear it being dogged, and the whine of the atomic motors starting up. He ran away from the blast area in wild blindness, seeking the protection of the bunkers set back from the blast pit. The bunkers beneath which the Resistance had their headquarters.

He stood at the filtered window, watching the thin line of exhaust trailings disappearing into the night sky.

He was alone.

The last man on Deald's World.

He remembered what Parkhurst had said: *I don't hate you. But this has to be done. It has to be done, and you will have to do it. But I don't hate you.*

And here he was, alone with a planet of attacking Kyben he had never even seen, and a total-destruction bomb in his stomach.

## V

After they were gone, after the last drop of exhaust trail had been lost in the starry night sky, Tallant stood by the open door of the bunker, staring across the emptiness of the field. They had left him; all his begging, all his appeals to their humanity, all his struggling, all of it had been for nothing. He was lost, lost out here in space, with the emptiness of the field and the emptiness of his heart.

The chill winds from the ocean came rippling across the field, caught him in their wake, and smoothed over him. He felt the hunger rising once more.

But this time, if nothing else, he could drown himself in dream-dust. That was it! He would send himself into a dust stupor, and lie there in heaven till the bomb went off, killing him.

He found the trapdoor, lifted it, and went down into the Resistance headquarters.

A half-hour, throwing supplies around, smashing into lockers,

breaking open cabinets, and he had found Doc Budder's supply of medicinal dream-dust. Nurmo-heroinyte concentrate; the dream-dust that had found him, made him a slave after one small sampling when he was twenty-three years old. That had been a long time before this, and he knew this was his only rest now.

He sniffed away a packet, and felt himself getting stronger, healthier, more fierce. Kyben? Yes, bring them on! He could fight the entire armada single-handed. Then let those lousy sonofabitching Earthies try to come back. Deald's World would be his, he would be the king, the master of the universe!

He strutted back up the stairs, slammed back the trapdoor, the white packets in his jumper pocket.

Tallant saw his first Kyban then.

They were swarming across the rocket field, hundreds of them. They were average-sized, more than five feet tall, less than six, all of them. They looked almost human—but golden-skinned; and their fingers ended in silky tentacles, six of them to a hand.

Abruptly, the resemblance to normal humans terrified Tallant. Had they been grotesque, it would be something else; he could despise and hate them as monsters. But these Kyben were, if anything, handsomer than humans.

He had never seen them before, but he had heard the screams that had echoed through the city's canyons. He had heard a girl getting the flesh flayed off her back, and in his own way he had felt sorry for her. He remembered he had wished she might die from loss of blood. Wounds like that would only take three or four hours to kill her. With the Kyben, that would have been the quickest, least painful way.

Yet they looked very much like humans. But golden.

Suddenly Tallant realized he was trapped. He was caught in one of the bunkers, with no protection, no weapon, no way out. They would find him, and kill him, not realizing he had the bomb in him. They would not ask whether or not he carried a bomb...that was too ridiculous to consider.

That was why Parkhurst had done it. It was too ridiculous to consider.

They were looking for a sun-bomb, and that bomb—according to the logic of a searcher—would be in some obscure hiding place. In the ocean, under a thousand tons of dirt, in a cave. But not in a human being. A human being was the last thing they might consider.

Nobody could be cruel enough to plant a sun-bomb in a human being.

That was why Parkhurst had done it.

He looked around the bunker wildly. There was only the one exit.

And the field was crawling with Kyben—furious enough at having been outfoxed to gut the first Earthie they found.

He watched them getting larger and larger in the filtered window.

As he watched, he noticed something further about them. They all wore suits of insulating mail, and each carried a triple-thread blastick. They were armed to kill, not to capture prisoners. He was trapped!

Tallant felt the fury of desperation welling up in him again. As it had when he had first learned he carried the sun-bomb. Not only to be boxed-in this way—to be a human bomb—but to have to keep running. He knew the Kyben were ruthless. They would already have started scouting for the bomb with ship-based emission detectors, spiraling over the planet in ever-decreasing circles, narrowing in on the bomb.

When they found it was not stationary, they would know it was in a living carrier. They would close in relentlessly, then. He was trapped!

But if these common foot-soldiers on the field got to him, he wouldn't even get *that* far, far enough to run. They would scorch him and laugh over his charred carcass. If they had that long to laugh. The bomb was certain to go off if he died—Parkhurst had said as much.

He had to get away.

Parkhurst was right. The only escape was in flight.

If he could stay alive long enough, he might be able to figure a way of dampening the bomb himself.

Or he had to keep away from them long enough to get to the Kyban commanding officers. It was the only chance. If he kept running, and avoided them entirely—the bomb would detonate eventually. He had to get to the men in charge, and have *them* remove the bomb without triggering it.

He would outsmart Parkhurst and his filthy bunch of survivors. He would not *let* himself get caught, unless it was by the right persons, in high places. Then he would offer his services to the Kyban, and help them hunt down the Earthmen, and kill them.

After all, what did he owe Earth?

Nothing. Nothing at all. They had tried to kill him, and he would make them pay. He would *not* die! He would live with his beloved dream-dust forever. Forever!

If he could remain alive that long, he would be able to think his way out of the Kyban camp. *That* was the answer!

Yes, that was it.

But now one Kyban foot-soldier was dodging, broken-field running, and now he was at the door of the bunker, and now he was inside, his triple-thread blastick roaring, spraying flame and death

around the bunker.

Tallant had been beside the window, behind the door. Now he slammed the door, so the others on the field could not see what was happening, and he found a new strength, a strength he had not known he possessed.

He dove low from behind the Kyban soldier, tackling him. The soldier fell, the blastick jarred from his hands, and Benno Tallant was up, stamping the alien's face in. One, two, three, four and the alien was dead, his head a pulped mass.

Then Tallant knew what to do.

He dragged the soldier by his feet to the edge of the trapdoor, lifted it, and shoved the Kyban through. The body went clattering down the stairs, and landed with a thump.

Tallant grabbed up the blastick and slipped in before any more soldiers could appear. He let the trapdoor slam shut, knowing it would not be seen unless there was a thorough search; there was no reason to expect that, as they believed all Earthmen had left the planet. This was a reconnaissance mission, and there would be no search.

He desperately hoped.

He crouched down, beneath the trapdoor, the blastick ready in his hands, ready to smear off the face of anyone who lifted the door.

Overhead he heard the sound of shouts, and the door of the bunker crashed open against the wall. He heard the rasp and roar of more blasticks being fired, and then the sound of voices in the sibilant hiss of the Kyban tongue. He heard boots stomping around above him, and men searching. Once a foot stepped directly on the trapdoor, and little bits of dust and dirt filtered through around the edges, and he thought he was caught then.

But a shout from outside brought grudging answer from the soldiers, and they trooped out, leaving the bunker deserted.

Tallant lifted the door to make certain, and when he saw it was clear, lifted it higher to look through the filtered window. The Kyben were moving off in the other direction.

He decided to wait till they had gone. Night was upon the land, and he wanted to get away.

While he waited, he sniffed a packet of dust.

He was God again!

He made it as far as the Blue Marshes before another patrol found him.

He had been moving—unawares—in the most perfect escape pattern imaginable, circling outward, so that any Kyban ships tracking

overhead with emission detectors could not pinpoint him. Eventually, of course, they would see that the target was not in the same place, and then they would recognize what the Earthmen had done.

He kept moving.

It was a totally cloudless, moonless night, with the stark black tips of the Faraway Mountains rising up beyond the marsh clingers and vines. The smell of the night was clean and quick, till he stepped off the land, and entered the Marshes. Then all the rot of the eternities swam up to offend his nostrils.

Tallant's stomach heaved, and for a moment he wondered if vomiting would set the bomb off. Then he recalled having been sick before, and knew action of that sort could not trigger the weapon.

He stepped into the swirling, sucking blue-black mud, and instantly felt it dragging down, down at his boots. He lifted the blastick above his head for leverage, and stepped high, pulling up each foot with a muted, sucking *thwup!* as he slowly moved.

The Marshes were filled with animal life, and whether vicious or harmless, they all made their voices heard. The noises swelled as he trod deeper into the dankness, as though some unimaginable insect telegraphy was warning the inhabitants that outside life was approaching. Ahead of him, and slightly to the left, he heard the deep-throated roar of a beast, and he knew it was big.

The fear began to ring his belly once more, and he found himself muttering, "Why me?" over and over again, in a dull monotone that somehow helped him keep going. As he moved, the subtle phosphorescence of the blue-black muck swirled, coating his lower legs and boots with glowing tips, and each step left a moment's round-edged hole in the stuff. Which was quickly sucked closed.

It was as he was scrambling over a rotted stump, fallen across the open way, having set his blastick in the crotch of a bush on the other side, that the beast broke out of the clinging matted vines, and trumpeted its warning at him.

Tallant froze. One foot in the air, the other shoved into a niche in the stump, his hands holding his full weight. His eyes opened wide, and he saw the dark gray bulk of the animal all at once.

It was almost triangular. A smooth thorax rose to an almost idiotically tiny head, set at the apex of the triangle. The back was a long slope that tapered to the ground. Its eight legs were set under it, almost as a kickplate might be set under a bookcase.

Two tiny red eyes gleamed through the mist of the Blue Marshes, set above a square snout and a fanged mouth that slobbered ooze. The beast stood silent for a moment. Then muted coughs left its throat, and its imbecilic head rose an inch on the non-existent neck.

It sniffed the breeze, it sniffed the mist, it sniffed the spoor of

Benno Tallant. It took one step, two, faltering, as though trying to decide whether advance was recommended. Tallant stared at the animal, unable to move from its path, a cold wash of complete terror hinging him to the stump as if it were the one solid form in the universe.

The beast trumpeted again, and lumbered forward.

Its scream struck out into the night, and the blast of fire that ripped at its gray hide came from nowhere. The beast rose on its back sets of legs, pawing at the sky. Another *scheeee* of power and the flames bit at the animal's tiny head.

For an instant the thing was wrapped in flame and smoke, then it exploded outward. Blood spilled through the leaves and vines, covering Tallant with warm, sticky liquid. Bits of flesh cascaded down, and he felt one slippery bit go sliding down his cheek.

His stomach twisted painfully in him, but the explosion unstuck him. He was not alone in the Marshes.

Since he was the last *man* on Deald's World, there was only one other answer.

Kyben? *Kyben!*

Then he heard their voices above the trembling sounds of the Marshes. They were around a bank of bushy trees, about to burst into the clearing where the scattered hulk of the beast lay, quivering, even in death.

Tallant felt a strange quivering in himself. He found a sudden inexplicable identification with the beast, lying out there in the open. That beast had been more man than he. It had died, in its brutishness, but it had not turned and run away. He knew the animal had no mind, and yet there was something...*something*...in the beast's death that made him feel altered, changed, matured. He could never tell what it had been, but when the animal had died, he knew he would never give up to the Kyben. He was still terribly frightened—the habits of a lifetime could not change in a moment—but there was a difference now. If he was going to die, he was going to make sure he died on his feet—not in the back as he ran away.

The Kyben came into view. They moved out from his left, almost close enough for him to touch them. They moved across the clearing, and he knew they had not seen him. But they had mechanisms that could trace the bomb's emissions, and in a few moments they would get his track. He had to do something—and quickly.

The five Kyben moved to the dead animal, obviously too engrossed in examining their kill to study their detectors. Tallant reached for the blastick in the crotch of the tree.

He slipped on the stump, and his hand collided with the metal of

the weapon. It clattered free from the tree, and fell with a splash into the mud.

One of the Kyben whirled, saw Tallant, and screamed something softly deadly to his companions, bringing his own instrument up. A blast of blue power streaked through the space between them, and Tallant hesitated only an instant. It was almost an instant too long. The blast-beam seared across his back, barely touching him, ripping wide his jumper's covering, scorching his flesh.

He screamed in agony, and dove headfirst into the muck himself, both trying to extinguish the fires of hell that arched on his back, and trying to find the weapon that had disappeared into the mire.

He fell solidly into the stuff, and felt it closing over his head. It was a pool of mud deeper than he had thought.

The stuff clogged his throat, and he struck out blindly. His hands broke to the top, and he suddenly realized this might be his only way out.

He tried to reach bottom, found it with his flailing feet, and dragged himself across the pool, gagging with each step. He felt the land rising under him, and stuck his head out momentarily.

The Kyben were still in front of him, but they were turned away slightly, thinking he was still in the same position, that perhaps he had drowned.

He knew immediately that he had to kill them all, and before they could call in to their superiors, or the game was up. The moment the Kyban Command knew there was a human left on the planet, they would realize where the bomb was hidden. Then any chance he had of surviving was gone.

He saw one of the Kyben—a tallish one with golden hair clipped into an extremely exaggerated flattop—turning toward him, his blastick at the ready. Then the adrenaline pumped through Tallant's veins, and he saw the beast, and for the first time in his life—knowing the dream-dust had worn off, but not really caring—he moved with aggression. He started running.

Lifting his feet high, he pounded around the rim of the pool, spraying blue mud and slime in every direction. The suddenness of the movement surprised the Kyban, and he failed to bring the blastick into play.

In a moment, Tallant was on him, the drive of his rushing advance bowling the Kyban over. Tallant's foot came down with a snap, and he felt the alien's neck snap under the pressure of his boot.

Then he had the blastick in his arms, fumbling for the fire stud, and raw power was blueing out, in a wide arc, catching the remaining four members of the patrol.

Their screams were short, and their bodies spattered the Marshes for fifty feet. Tallant stared down at the raw, pulsing husks that had been aliens a minute before, and leaned against a tree.

*God, God, God...* he murmured over and over in his mind's desertland, and felt the nausea rising again. He thought of the dust for a moment. Of the packets in his sealed jumper pocket, but felt no need for it now.

Somehow, the fire was up in him.

The killer instinct was rising in the coward.

Tallant struck out again, a fresh weapon in his hands.

By now the Earthmen were far away in their ships, and the Kyben still feared the bomb would trigger if they tried to take off; Tallant *knew* they had not tried to leave Deald's World by one fact only:

The bomb in his middle had not exploded yet.

But time was dripping away.

## VI

That night, Tallant killed his twentieth and thirtieth Kyben.

The second set of five went as he left the Blue Marshes. Ambushed from behind a huge, snout-like rock, they went down bubbling.

Single reconnaissance men died by knife and by club at Tallant's hands as he made his way through the fields of swaying, unharvested Summerset that lay on the outskirts of Xville. They walked slowly through the fields, another five-man team, just their shoulders and heads showing above the tall burnished stalks of grain. Occasionally Tallant, from where he crouched below sight-level in the field, saw the snout of a blastick poke up from the Summerset. It was hardly difficult at all to drag each one down in his turn as the alien passed nearby.

The first one's skull shattered like a plastic carton, as Benno Tallant swung the end of the blastick viciously. Even as the Kyban sank down nearly atop him, the looter felt a rugged thrill course down his veins; there was a pleasure he had never known in this sort of guerrilla warfare. From the first team-member he had taken the long, scythe-shaped knife with its inlaid tile handle.

It had worked wondrously well on the other four.

Kyban blood was yellow. He wasn't surprised.

By the time dawn slid glowingly up on the horizon, Tallant knew the Kyben were aware of his presence. What it meant, who he was, what he was doing on Deald's World...none of those answerables might have occurred to them as clearly as he phrased them, but thirty Kyben had by that time died before the blue power of his blastick or the curve of his knife. And eventually they would be found where they had fallen; they would be reported missing; they would not check in.



Then the Kyban Command would know they were not alone on the planet.

All through the night he had heard robot patrol scouts circling overhead, trying to track down the neutrino emission of the bomb, and several times two or three had homed in on him. But at two miles radius they merely circled, waiting to pinpoint by ground search. But before the troops could close in, he had made good his escape, and they circled helplessly, awaiting new instructions.

It seemed about the time for them to realize the bomb was in a moving carrier. What that carrier was, and the reason thirty troops were dead, would soon show themselves to be the same: a man alive on the planet.

The robot patrol scouts circled and buzzed overhead, and for a moment Tallant wondered how *they* had gotten aloft when a ship could not. Then he answered his question with the logical reason. The robots were just that—robots. Operating from mechanical means. The ships were inverspace ships, operating from warp-mechanisms. And it was obviously the warp pattern that set the bomb off.

So he could be easily tracked, but the Kyben could not leave, to chase and destroy the Earthies.

Tallant's fist balled and his dirt-streaked face twisted in a new kind of hatred as he thought of the men who had left him here to die. Parkhurst and Shep and Doc Budder and the rest. They who had left him here to this!

He was fooling them. He was staying alive!

*But wasn't that what they had wanted?* Hadn't they chosen properly? Wasn't he running to stay alive, allowing them to escape to warn Earth? What did he care for Earth? What had it ever given him?

He swore then, in a voiceless certainty deeper than mere frustration and anger, that he would do more than survive. He would come out of this ahead. He wasn't sure *how*...but he would.

As the light of morning reached him through the jagged opening in the front of the building, where he lay on the floor, he vowed he would not die here on this—someone else's—battlefield.

He rose to his feet, and looked out through the blasted plasteel face of the building. The capital city of Deald's World stretched below him, and to the right.

In the center, towering higher than any building, was the command ship of the Kyban fleet.

Somehow, in the darkness, with the newly-acquired stealth of a Marsh animal, he had passed the outgoing Kyban troop lines, and was behind their front. He was inside the circle. Now he had to take advantage of that.

He sat down for a moment to think of his only way out.

Before the looting Kyban soldier stepped into the room, he had arrived at the solution. He had to get to that Kyban ship, and get inside. He had to find a Kyban surgeon. It might be death, but it was a *might*; any other way it was a certainty.

He stood up to go, to skulk through the alleys of Xville to the ship, when the double-chinned, muscled Kyban came up the partially-ruined stairs, and stopped cold in the entrance of the room, amazement mirrored on his putted features. An Earthie...here on conquered ground!

He dragged his blastick from its sheath, aimed it, and fired dead range at Tallant's stomach.

The shaft of blue light caught Tallant as he rocketed sideways. It seared at his flesh, and he felt an all-consuming wave of pain rip down through him. He had side-stepped partially, and the blast had taken him high on the right arm. He was horribly convulsed by agony for an instant, then...

He could not feel his right arm.

Tallant was moving through a fog of pain, and in a moment, before the Kyban could fire again, had grabbed the blastick with his left hand. The little man felt a strange power coursing through him, and he dimly recognized it as the power of hatred; the hatred of all other men, all other beings, that had displaced his cowardice.

He ripped at the blastick violently, and the alien was yanked toward him, thrown off-balance.

As the bewildered Kyban stumbled past, losing his hold on his own weapon, Tallant brought up a foot, and sent it slamming into the alien's back.

The yellow outworlder staggered forward, arms thrown out wildly, tripped over the rubble clogging the floor, and pitched headfirst through the rift in the wall.

Tallant limped to the hole and watched him fall, screaming.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaarghhhhh!" and the sound of it whistled back up through the city's canyon, till it vanished with an audible thud thirty floors below. That scream, held and piercing, was more than a death knell. It was a signal. The area was a great sounding-board, and every foot of that screaming descent had been recorded on the walls and in the stones of the city.

The Kyben would be here shortly. Their comrade could not have directed them to their goal more effectively had he planned it.

Then Tallant realized something:

He had only one arm.

His eyes seemed to swing down without his willing them; he could feel no pain now; the blastick had cauterized the stump immediately.

There would be no infection, there would be no more pain, but he was neatly amputated at the biceps. His eyes moved slightly and he gagged at the sight.

With one arm, what could he *hope* to accomplish?

How could he stay alive?

Then he heard the raised voices of the Kyben coming through the building; he knew they would investigate from where their comrade had fallen. He moved with wooden legs, feeling the fight draining out of him, but moving nonetheless.

Moving in a reflexive pattern of survival...recognizing his only chance was to get to that Kyban flagship towering in the center of Xville. He had arrived at the lone chance, the final chance available to him, after close inspection of all paths out of this situation. That chance was almost certainly death, but the *almost* was a shade no other chance held.

His legs carried him out of the room, down a back flight of stairs, endlessly, endlessly down and somewhere along the way—probably in the room itself, but he could not quite remember—he carried the blastick. Then there was a time, as he wound down the interminable stairs, when he did not have the blastick. And even later, as he saw the big number 14 on the wall by the door, he had it again. As the numbers decreased, as 10 melted to 5 to 3, he realized he had come thirty flights...entirely in shock.

When he was on the first floor, the front of the building was surrounded by Kyben, staring and motioning at the body of their comrade. Tallant looked away; he had thought himself injured to death, but the Kyban had died in a particularly unpleasant manner.

He shifted the blastick in the crook of his arm—the one arm left—and huddled back against the wall. There were three tortuous miles of ruined city and piled rubble between him and the flagship. (And once he was there, he had no assurance that the thing he sought would even be there!) Not to mention the entire land-army of the Kyban fleet, a horde of robot patrol scouts that must surely have realized the bomb was being carried by a man, and his own wounds.

He leaned the blastick against the wall, and felt gingerly at the stump of his arm. There was no pain, and the raw, torn end had been neatly, completely, like a bit of putty smoothed over, cauterized. He felt fine otherwise, though the night in the Blue Marshes had brought him a kink in the right leg, forcing him into an unconscious limp.

There was still a chance to make it.

At that moment he heard the public address system in the scout ship that circled the building. It boomed down, flooding the streets with sound, in English:

“EARTHMAN! WE KNOW YOU ARE HERE! GIVE YOURSELF UP BEFORE YOU DIE! EVEN IF YOU CONTROL THE BOMB, WE WILL FIND YOU AND KILL YOU...FIND YOU AND KILL YOU...FIND YOU AND KILL YOU...”

The robot scout ship moved off across the city, the same message broadcast over and over, till Tallant felt each word burning into his brain. *Find you and kill you, find you and kill you...*

His breath came in short gasps, and he stumbled back against the wall, feeling its stony coolness under his hands. He closed his eyes, and drank deeply of emptiness. The path of cowardice was a twisting one. He had found that out. But though it might occasionally cross the road of bravery, it always passed back to the other path.

Tallant was frightened. He reached for his dream-dust.

Time was growing short and Tallant could feel it in his gut.

He had no way of knowing whether the bomb was nearing triggering time, but there was a vague, prickling sensation throughout his body that he interpreted as danger. The bomb might go off at any second, and that would be the end of it. Benno Tallant tightened his single fist into a painful ball; his rodent-like face drew down into an expression of blind fury, and the lines about his closed eyes grew deeper as he screwed his eyes tighter. He squeezed them till he heard a muted roaring in his ears; then he swore to himself he would come out ahead in this situation! Somehow, although he knew no possible way it could come true, he was going to beat the lousy Earthies who had done this to him. He was going to get to that flagship...and when he did! He was going to win.

Not by cutting the corners the way a coward would...the way he had been doing it for years...but the way a winner does it, the way *he* was going to do it.

He hefted the blastick and turned to go.

The Kyben knew now that the bomb was in a human's hands. Not in a human's stomach—that they could *not* know—but in a human's hands. For their target had moved, shifted, eluded them all through the night. Obviously it was not buried or fastened down. Hidden in the best possible place...in a moving target. They were after him, and the net would be closing down. But there were a few things in his favor.

The most important of which was the fact that he had killed a number of patrolmen out in the fields, in the Marshes, and they would center their search in that area. They would not realize he had come through the sewer system into the capital city during the night.

He was safe for a while.

Even as Tallant thought that, as he moved toward the basement stairs of the ruined building, a Kyban officer, resplendent in sand-white uniform and gold braid, came through the door in front of him.

The alien was unarmed, but in an instant he had whipped out the dress knife, and was making passes in the air before Tallant's face. That same feeling of urgency, of strength from some unknown pool within him, boiled up in Tallant. The officer was too close for Tallant to use the long blastick, but he still had the arc-shaped knife from the night before. He dropped the blastick softly into a pile of ash and slag-dust, ducked as the Kyban blade whistled past his ear, and leaped for the officer, before the other's tentacled hand could whip back around.

With his one hand fingers-out, Tallant reached the Kyban, drove the thin fingers deep into the alien's eyes. The officer let out a piercing shriek as his eyeballs watered into pulp, and the prongs of Tallant's hand went into his head. Then, before the Kyban could open his mouth to shriek again, before he could do anything but wave his hands emptily in the air, feeling his eyes running down his cheeks, Benno Tallant drew his own scythe-shaped blade from his belt, and slashed the alien's neck with one sidearm swipe.

The officer fell in a golden-blooded heap, and Tallant grabbed up his blastick, charging through the hall of the building, reaching the door that led to the basement, slamming it behind him, and plunging into the darkness of the building's depths.

Overhead he could hear the yells of Kyban foot-soldiers discovering their officer, but he didn't wait to have them discover him. Keeping careful track of which direction he faced, he felt around the floor of the basement till he contacted the sealplug that led to the sewers. He had come up through that polluted dankness the night before, seeking momentary rest, and fresh air.

He had climbed to the top of the building to see how the enemy was displaced, and fallen asleep—against his will. Now he was back to the sewers, and the sewers would carry him to the one lone chance for life he could imagine.

He ran his suddenly strong fingers around the edge of the sealing strip, and pried up the heavy lid with one hand.

He grimaced in the darkness. He *had* to pry it up with one hand... that was all they had left him.

Another moment and the port sighed up, counter-balanced, and Tallant slid himself over the lip, the blastick stuck through his belt. He kept himself wedged against the side of the hole, a few feet above the darkly swirling water of the sewer, and grabbed for the lid. The sealplug sighed down, and Tallant let himself drop.

The knife slid from his belt, fell into the water and was gone in an instant. He hit the tunnel wall as he fell, and came down heavily on one leg, tightening it, sending a pain shooting up through his left side.

He regained his footing by clawing at the slimy walls of the tunnel, and braced himself, legs spread wide apart against the dragging tide of the sewer water.

He kept pulling himself along the wall till he found a side-tunnel that headed in the proper direction. Just as he turned the corner, he saw the sealplug open, far back down the tunnel's length, and a searchbeam flooded the water with a round disc of light. They had suspected his means of escape already.

"Ssssissss sss sss kliss-iss!" He heard the sibilance of the Kyban speech being dragged down the hollowness of the tunnel to him. They were coming down into the sewers after him.

He had to hurry. The net was tightening. He knew he had a good chance of getting away, even though they had light and he had none.

They would have to try *all* the tunnels, but he would not; he would keep going in one direction, inexorably.

The direction that led to the gigantic Kyban flagship.

## VII

It was a short run from the sewer plug that exited by the service entrance of what had been a department store. A short run, and he was hidden by the shadow of the monstrous spaceship fin. A guard stood by the ramp; guards stood at each ramp; Tallant circled.

He found a loading ramp, and the guard slumped against the shining skin of the deep-space ship. Tallant took a step toward the alien, realized he'd never make it in time.

The same strange urge to strike rose up in Benno Tallant, showing him a way he would not have considered the day before. He could not use the blastick—too noisy; he had lost the scythe-knife; he was too far away to throw a boot and hope it would stun the guard.

So he walked out, facing the guard, coughing.

Carefully, nonchalantly, as though he had every right to be there. And as the guard heard the coughing, looked up, and amazedly watched Tallant stalking toward him...Benno Tallant waved a greeting, and began to whistle.

The guard watched for a second.

The second was long enough.

Tallant had his hand around the alien's neck before the guard could raise an alarm. One leg behind the Kyban's, and he was atop the guard. The butt of the blastick shattered the flat-featured face, and the way was clear.

Tallant crouched as he walked up the ramp. Late morning light

filtered across his back, and he held the cumbersome blastick with one hand on the trigger-stock, the weapon shoved under his armpit. He sprinted quickly up the ramp, slid his hand down the stock to the handle. The inside of the ship was cool and moist and dark.

Kyba was a cooler planet, and a moister planet, and a darker planet.

But all three congealed into a feeling of dank oppression that made Tallant wonder bleakly whether it was worth it; whether life was so important suddenly, that he should keep on moving, and not just lie down.

He saw what must have been a freight shaft, and stepped into it. There was no drag, and he pressed a button on the inner wall of the hollow tube. The suck was immediately generated, drawing him up through the ship.

He let himself slow by scraping his heels against the inner wall, at each layer of the ship, seeking the one escape factor he hoped was on board.

He saw no one. The ship's complement had been cut to the dregs, obviously. Every able-bodied Kyban sent planetside to search for the bomb.

Here was the bomb...walking through the mother ship.

Tallant began to sweat as he rose in the shaft; if he had figured incorrectly, if what he thought was aboard, was *not* aboard, he was doomed. He was...he saw what he wanted!

The Kyban was walking down a hall, directly in Tallant's line of sight as he peered from the freight tube. He wore a long white smock, and though Tallant had no way of knowing for certain, he was sure the apparatus hanging about the alien's neck was the equivalent of an electrostethoscope.

This Kyban was a doctor.

Tallant propelled himself from the shaft, landed on the plasteel deck of the ship with legs spread, the blastick wedged between body and armpit, his hand tight to the trigger-stock.

The Kyban doctor stopped dead, staring at this man who had come from nowhere. The alien's eyes roved up and down Tallant's body, stopping for a long moment at the stump of the right arm.

Tallant moved toward the doctor, and the Kyban backed up warily.

"English," Tallant asked roughly. "You speak English?"

The doctor stared silently at Tallant, and the Earthman squeezed a bit harder on the trigger-stock, till his knuckles went white with the strain of not firing.

The Kyban doctor nodded simply.

"There's got to be an operating room around here," Tallant went

on, commandingly. "Take me there. Now!"

The doctor watched the man silently, till Tallant began to advance. Then he suddenly realized—Tallant could see the dawning realization in alien eyes—that this desperate creature must *need* him for something, and would not—under *any* circumstances—shoot. Tallant saw the realization on the alien's flat-featured face, and an instant reciprocal fury possessed him.

He backed the alien to the wall, and gripped the blastick farther down its length. Then he swung it, hard!

The muzzle cracked across the Kyban's shoulder, and he let out a muted moan. Tallant hit him again, in the stomach; a third time across the face, opening a gash that ran to the temple. Had the Kyban not been nearly bald, his hair would have been matted with blood.

The alien sank back against the wall, began to slide down. Tallant kicked him just below the double-jointed knee, straightening the doctor up.

"You'll stay alive, Doc...but don't try your stamina against mine. I've been up all night, running from your foot-soldiers. And right along now I'm getting pretty edgy. So you just walk ahead of me, and we'll see that operating room of yours."

The golden-skinned outworlder hesitated a fraction of a second, and Tallant brought his knee up with a snap. The medic screamed, then. High and piercing. Tallant knew the sound would carry through the ship, so he kicked out at the alien, driving him before the blastick.

"Now you get this straight, fella," Tallant snarled. "You're going to walk ahead of me, right straight to that operating room, and you're going to do a little surgery on me...and one move, so help me God, *one move* that seems unlikely, and I take off the top of your yellow skull. Now *move it!*"

He jabbed the blastick hard into the Kyban's back, and the medic tottered off down the hall.

They were passing a utility rack—loaded with leg chains and head braces and manacles, used by the Kyben to keep prisoners in tow—when the Kyban sergeant struck. He had heard the scream, come out of the wardroom, and positioned himself in the alcove behind the utility rack, waiting for Tallant and the doctor to come his way. The attack was too hurried, however; and as the sergeant lunged for Tallant, and wrenched the blastick from his hand to ensure the medic's safety, Tallant whirled away, and smashed the glass of the utility rack.

In a moment his reflexes had taken over, and he bore no slightest resemblance to the quivering Benno Tallant who had cried to Parkhurst for his life. Now he was an avenging devil. His hand closed



about a long, heavy-link leg chain, and brought it whistling free from its pincers and through the air with a snap.

The chain caught the Kyban sergeant along the base of the skull, and the outworlder choked out a sibilant nothing as his brain was smashed in its case.

He fell frontwards, crashing against the medic who had been reaching for the dropped blastick, and they tumbled to the plasteel floor together.

The chain was imbedded in the Kyban's head.

Tallant took a short step and brought his booted foot down with a crunch on the medic's hand. Hard enough to discourage the alien's reaching...but not hard enough to impair his surgical ability.

Tallant spotted a service revolver halfway drawn from its snigger on the Kyban sergeant's belt, and he drew the sleek little sliver-nosed pistol, pointing it at the medic.

"This is better.

"Let's go."

The medic got to his feet with difficulty, groaning as he rose. He knew now that Tallant was more dangerous than an entire army. The Earthman was desperate, really desperate, and he knew why: this must be the one who had the bomb. The Commandant had been talking about this man the night before, when they had realized a man was still alive on Deald's World.

He had taken a great deal of punishment, and he knew the Earthie would continue to deal it out; not enough to kill him, but the pain would be very great.

The Kyban doctor was no hero.

The operating room was inevitable.

"And take your comrade with you," Tallant added.

The medic grabbed up the sergeant's feet and dragged him behind as he walked toward the operating room. The trail of blood was faintly golden against the plasteel floor plates. Tallant kicked the blastick into the alcove. They might not come down through this corridor too soon, still looking as they were for him, outside the city.

The operating room was inevitable.

Tallant refused to take even a local anesthetic. He sat propped up on the operating table, the silver-shaft revolver pointed directly at the medic. The Kyban stared at the cylinder of the gun, saw the little capsules in their chambers, thought of how they were fired through the altering mechanism, how they came out as raw energy, and he wielded the electrosscalpel with care.

Tallant's face became beaded with sweat as the incisions were made; though he hardly felt the electric beam cut through the flesh.

But as the layers of flesh that had been the scar peeled back, and he again saw his innards, wet and pulsing, he remembered the first time.

Things had changed, *he* had changed since Doc Budder had put the bomb in his belly. Now he was nearing the end of the path...starting a new one.

In twenty minutes it was over.

Tallant had guessed correctly.

The bomb could *not* be set off under cautious operating conditions. Parkhurst had made great mention of the inverspace drive's warp field setting it off, and of the bomb detonating of its own accord when the time came. But when it had come to mention of the Kyben removing it, he had threatened Tallant only with being cut to ribbons. Perhaps it had been Parkhurst's subconscious way of offering Tallant a chance; perhaps it had just been an oversight in the Resistance leader's explanation...but in either case, the operation had been completed successfully, and the bomb was out.

Tallant watched carefully as the Kyban put an alien version of an epidermizer on the wound. He watched steadily for a half-hour as the scar built up.

Then he was whole again, and the danger had been extracted from his belly.

He stared at the medic carefully, said in level tones:

"Graft the bomb to my stump."

The medic's dark eyes opened wider; he blinked rapidly, and Tallant repeated what he had said. The medic backed away, knowing what purpose Tallant had in mind—or *thinking* he knew, which was the same thing as far as Tallant was concerned.

It took ten minutes of pistol-whipping for Tallant to realize the medic would go only so far, and no farther. The physician would *not* graft the total destruction sun-bomb to the stump of Tallant's right arm.

...at least...not under his own will.

The idea dawned slowly, but when formed was clear and whole and practicable. Tallant reached into his jumper pocket, extracted one of the last two packets of dream-dust. He bent down, and under pressure, made the half-conscious Kyban sniff it. He got the entire packet, the full, demolishing dose into the alien's nostrils. Then he settled back to wait, remembering the first time he had met the dream-dust.

The memory flooded back, and he recalled that the first, imprudent whiffing had made him a confirmed addict; it was powerful

that way.

When the medic awoke, he would be an addict...would do *anything* for that last packet nestling in Tallant's jumper pocket.

The Earthman knew he would never again be God—or at least till he could locate more dust—but it was worth it, for what he had in mind. *More* than worth it.

He waited, knowing they would not be disturbed. The Kyben were out looking for him, and the emissions of the ship around him would confuse the robot scouts; he was safe for the time being. And when the medic awoke, he would do *anything* Tallant wanted.

Tallant wanted only one thing.

The sun-bomb grafted to his arm, where he could detonate it in an instant.

There had been no pain. The same force that had ripped Tallant's arm to atoms, had deadened the nerve ends. The bomb was set into the flesh slightly, a block at the end of the stump. With a simple wire hookup that would detonate under several circumstances:

If Tallant consciously triggered the bomb.

If anyone tried to remove the bomb against his will.

If he died, and his heart stopped.

The Kyban doctor had done his work well. Now he huddled, shaking under the effects of total dust addiction, moaning, begging Tallant for the last packet.

"Sure, mister, you can have the snuff." He held the clear plastic packet between two fingers, so the Kyban could see both the revolver and the dust at once. "But first, first. First you take me updecks to meet your Commandant."

The Kyban's eyes were golden slits, but they widened now as he tried to comprehend what the Earthie meant. He had thought he knew what the man was after...to get rid of the bomb and leave Deald's World. But now...

He was confused, terrified. What was this insatiable hunger that clawed at him, and made his every nerve a burning wire? The Earthman had done it to him, and somehow, he knew that little white packet held the end of his hunger.

He hardly realized he had led the Earthman to the bridge, but when he looked again, they were there, and the Commandant was staring wide-eyed at them, demanding an explanation. Needing none, really.

Then, as the doctor watched, Tallant raised the revolver and fired. The shot took away half the Commandant's face, and he spun

sidewise, spraying himself across the port. The body tumbled to the floor and rolled a few inches, to the edge of the dropshaft. Tallant walked past the doctor, and calmly nudged the body over with his boot. The body hung there a split instant, then dropped out of sight as quickly as a stone down a well.

There was only one more step to take.

Tallant walked over to the doctor, examining him carefully as he came nearer. The man was a typical Kyban...a bit shorter than most, with a protruding stomach, and a head that would be quite bald in a few years.

His skin was the aging off-gold of the Kyban race, and his face was strong. Strong, that is—Tallant noted—with the exception of the infinitesimal tic in the cheek and lower lip, the hunger lines about the mouth and eyes. The good doctor was now an addict, and that suited Tallant just fine.

He found a weird pleasure in having bent this man so simply to his design. He found the events of the past day invigorating, now that they were over.

And as the face of the doctor grew larger in his eyes, Benno Tallant took stock of himself. The bad in him—and he was the first to admit it was there, festering deeper than any superficial nastiness—had not changed one bit. It had not become good, it had not tempered him into mellow thoughts through his trials, it had left him only harder. It had matured itself.

For years, as he skulked and begged, as he weaseled and cheated, his strength of amorality had been going through an adolescence. Now it was mature. Now he had direction, and he had purpose. Now he was no longer a coward, for he had faced all the death the world could throw at him, and had bested it. He had outsmarted the Earthmen, he had outmaneuvered the Kyben. He had bested the foot-soldiers in the field, and the mathematicians in the bunkers. He had lived through the bomb, and the attack of the aliens, and the night of terror and all it held otherwise. He had come through the Marshes, and the fields, and the city, to this final place.

To this cabin of the fleet ship.

But he was not the Benno Tallant the Earthmen had found the day before, looting a dead shopkeeper. He was another man entirely. A man whose life had taken the one possible turn it could...for the other turn—*death*—was a stranger to him.

Benno Tallant shoved the doctor ahead of him, to the banks of controls.

He paused, turning the shaking addict to him. He stared into the golden slits, and the golden face, and realized with consummate

pleasure that he did not hate these aliens who had tried to find him and cut out his belly; he admired them, for they were engaged in taking what they wanted.

No, he didn't hate *them*.

"What is your name, my good old friend?" he asked cheerily.

The doctor's hand, tentacle-ended, came up quivering, to beg for the last packet. Tallant slapped the hand away; he did not hate the outworlders, but he had no room for sympathy. All of that decency and compassion was gone—burned away by the blast of hell in the bombed-out building, eaten away by the cruelty of his fellow Earthmen. He was hard now, and reveled in it.

"Your name!"

The doctor's tongue quivered over the word: "Norghese."

"Well, Doctor Norghese, you and I are going to be ever such good friends, you know that? You and I are going to do big things together, aren't we?"

In the quivering, chill-raked body of the little doctor, Tallant knew he had a slave from this time on. He clapped the alien about the shoulders.

"Find me the communications rig in this mess, Doc."

The alien pointed it out, and on command, threw the switch that connected Tallant to the troops in the field, to the ships that were settled all across Deald's World, to the skeleton crew of the ship in which he stood.

He lifted the speak-stick, and stared at it for a moment. He had considered blowing up the fleet, ordering it to return home, a number of things.

But that had been the day before when he had been Tallant the Trembling.

This was today.

And he was a new Benno Tallant.

He spoke sharply and shortly.

"This is the last man on Deald's World, my Kyban friends. I'm the man your superiors have finally realized carried the sun-bomb.

"Hear me now!

"I still carry it. But now I control it. I can set it off at any moment, and kill us all...even in space. Believe that the power of this bomb is incalculable. If you doubt me, I will let you speak to Doctor Norghese of the mother ship, in a few moments, and he will verify what I've said.

"But you have no reason to fear me...or what I can do. I'm going to offer you a deal far superior to anything you had as mere Kyban soldiers on conquest missions for your home world.

“I offer you the chance to become conquerors in your own right. Now that you’ve been away from home for years, and are weary of battle, I’ll offer you the chance to come home not just as tin heroes, but as warriors with money and worlds at your command.

“Does it matter to you who leads this fleet? As long as you conquer the galaxies? I don’t think it does!”

He paused, knowing they would see it his way. They would have to see it that way. Planetary allegiance only went so far, and he could turn this home-hungry planetful of foot-soldiers into the greatest conquering force ever known.

“Our first destination is...” he paused, knowing he was hewing a destiny he could never escape, “...Earth!”

He handed the speak-stick to the doctor, shoved him once to indicate he wanted verification of what he had said, listened for a moment to make sure the doctor’s sibilant monotone in English was appropriate.

Then he walked to the viewport, and stared out as the dusk fell again across the city of Xville, and the fields of slowly ripening Summerset, and beyond them the Marshes and the Faraway Mountains.

He watched it all...Deald’s World...and made a vow that his revenge would be long and detailed.

Then something Parkhurst had said, oddly enough, leaped to mind as appropriate for this time and this place and his new life:

*I don’t hate you. But this has to be done. It has to be done, and you will have to do it. But I don’t hate you.*

He thought the thoughts, and knew they were true.

He didn’t hate anyone now. He was above that; he was Benno Tallant, and now there was no need for the dust; he was cured.

He turned away from the port and looked about at the ship that would mold his destiny, knowing he was free of Deald’s World, free of the dust. He needed neither now.

Now he was God on his own.

—New York, 1958

## ARE YOU LISTENING?

There are several ways I wanted to start telling this. First, I was going to begin it:

*I began to lose my existence on a Tuesday morning.*

But then I thought about it and:

*This is my horror story.*

...seemed like a better way to begin. But after thinking it over (I've had a devil of a lot of time to think it over, believe you me), I realized both of those were pretty melodramatic, and if I wanted to instill trust and faith and all that from the outset, I had just better begin the way it happened, and tell it through to now, and then make my offer, and well, let you decide for yourself.

Are you listening?

Perhaps it all began with my genes. Or my chromosomes. Whichever or whatever combination made me a Casper Milquetoast prototype, that or those are to blame, I'm sure. I woke up a year ago on a Tuesday morning in March, and knew I was the same as I had been for hundreds of other mornings past. I was forty-seven years old, I was balding, my eyes were good—and the glasses I used only for reading. I slept in a separate room from my wife Alma, and I wore long underwear—chiefly because I've always picked up a chill quickly.

The only thing that might possibly be considered out-of-the-ordinary about me is that my name is Winsocki.

Albert Winsocki.

You know, like the song...

"Buckle down Winsocki, you can win Winsocki if you'll only buckle down..." Very early in life I was teased about that, but my mild nature kept me from taking offense, and instead of growing to loathe it, I adopted it as a sort of personal anthem. Whenever I find myself whistling something, it is usually that.

However—

I woke up that morning, and got dressed quickly. It was too cold to take a shower, so I just dabbed water on my wrists and face, and dressed quickly. As I started down the stairs, Zasu, my wife's Persian, swept past between my legs. Zasu is a pretty stable cat, and I had never been quite snubbed before, though the animal *had* taken to ignoring me with great skill. But this morning of which I speak, she

just swarmed past, and not even a meowrrl or a spit. It was unusual, but not remarkable.

But just an indication of what was to come.

I came into the living room, and saw that Alma had laid out my paper on the arm of the sofa, just as she had done for twenty-seven years. I picked it up in passing, and came into the dinette.

My orange juice was set out, and I could hear Alma in the kitchen beyond. She was muttering to herself as usual. That is one of my wife's unpleasant habits, I'm afraid. At heart she is a sweet, dear woman, but when she gets annoyed, she murmurs. Nothing obscene, for goodness sake, but just at the bare threshold of audibility, so that it niggles and naggles and bothers. She *knew* it bothered me, or perhaps she didn't, I'm not sure. I don't think Alma was aware that I really *had* any likes or dislikes of any real strength.

At any rate, there she was, muttering and murmuring, so I just called out, "I'm down, dear. Good morning." Then I turned to the paper, and the juice. Acidic.

The paper was full of the same sort of stuff, and what else could orange juice be but orange juice?

However, as the minutes passed, Alma's mutters did not pass away. In fact, they got louder, more angry, more annoyed. "Where is that man? He *knows* I despise waiting breakfast! Now look...the eggs are hard. Oh, where *is* he?"

This kept up for some time, though I repeatedly yelled in to her, "Alma, *please* stop, I'm here. I'm down, can't you understand?"

Finally, she came storming past, and went through into the living room. I could hear her at the foot of the stairs—hand on banister, one foot flat on the first step—yelling up to no one at all, "Albert! *Will* you come down? Are you in the bathroom again? Are you having trouble with your kidneys? Shall I come up?"

Well, that was too much, so I laid aside my napkin, and got up. I walked up behind her and said, just as politely as I could, "Alma. What is the matter with you, dear? I'm right here."

It made no impression.

She continued howling, and a few moments later stalked upstairs. I sat down on the steps, because I was sure Alma had lost her mind, or her hearing had gone, or something. After twenty-seven happily married years, my wife was dreadfully ill.

I didn't know what to do. I was totally at a loss. I decided it would be best to call Dr. Hairshaw. So I went over and dialed him, and his phone rang three times before he picked it up and said, "Hello?"

I always felt guilty calling him, no matter what time of the day it was—he had *such* an intimidating tone—but I felt even *more* self-



conscious this time, because there was a decidedly muggy value to his voice. As though he had just gotten out of bed.

"Sorry to wake you at this hour, Doctor," I said quickly. "This is Albert Winso—"

He cut me off with, "Hello? Hello?"

I repeated, "Hello, Doctor? This is Al—"

"Hello there? Anyone there?"

I didn't know what to say. It was probably a bad connection, so I screamed as loud as I could. "Doctor, this is—"

"Oh, *hell!*" he yelled, and jammed down the receiver.

I stood there for a second with the handpiece gripped tightly, and I'm dreadfully afraid an expression of utter bewilderment came over my face. Had everyone gone deaf, today? I was about to re-dial, when Alma came down the stairs, talking out loud to herself.

"Now *where* on Earth can that man have gone? Don't tell me he got up and went out without any breakfast? Oh well, that's less work for me today."

And she went right smack past me, staring right *through* me, and into the kitchen. I plonked down the receiver and started after her. This was *too* much! During the past few years Alma had lessened her attentions to me, even at times seemed to ignore me; I would speak and she would not hear, I would touch her and she would not respond. There had been increasingly more of these occasions, but this was too much!

I went into the kitchen and walked up behind her. She did not turn, just continued scouring the eggs out of the pan with steel wool. I screamed her name. She did not turn, did not even break the chain of humming.

I grabbed the pan from her hands and banged it as hard as I could on the stove-top (something remarkably violent for me, but I'm sure you can understand that this was a remarkable situation). She did not even start at the noise. She went over to the icebox and took out the cube trays. She began to defrost the box.

That was the last straw. I slammed the pan to the floor and stalked out of the room. I was on the verge of swearing, I was so mad. What kind of game *was* this? All right, so she didn't want to make my breakfast; so that was just one more little ignoring factor I had to put up with. All right, so why didn't she just *say* so. But this folderol was too much!

I put on my hat and coat and left the house—slamming the door as hard as I could.

I glanced at my pocket-watch, and saw the time had long since passed for me to catch my bus to the office. I decided to take a taxi,

though I wasn't quite sure my budget could afford the added strain. But it was a necessity, so I walked past the bus stop, and hailed a cab as it went past. Went past is correct. It zipped by me without even slowing. I had seen it was empty, so why didn't the cabbie stop? Had he been going off duty? I supposed that was it, but after eight others had whizzed by, I was certain something was wrong.

But I could not discern what the trouble might be. I decided, since I saw it coming, to take the bus anyhow. A young girl in a tight skirt and funny little hat was now waiting at the stop, and I looked at her rather sheepishly, saying, "I just can't figure out these cabmen, can you?"

She ignored me. I mean, she didn't turn away as she would to some masher, nor did she give me a cursory glance and not reply. I mean, she didn't know I was there.

I didn't have any more time to think about it, because the bus stopped, and the girl got on. I started up the steps, and barely made it for the bus driver slammed the doors with a wheeze, catching the tail of my coat.

"Hey! I'm caught!" I yelled, but he paid no attention. He watched in his rear view mirror as the girl swayingly strode to a seat, and he started to whistle. The bus was crowded, and I didn't want to make a fool of myself, so I reached out and pulled his pants leg. Still, he didn't respond.

That was when the idea started to form.

I yanked my coattail loose, and I was so mad I decided to make him ask for his fare. I walked back, expecting any moment to hear him say, "Hey, you. Mister. You forgot to pay your fare." Then I was going to respond, "I'll pay my fare, but I'll report you to your company, too!"

But even that tiny bit of satisfaction was denied me, because he continued to drive, and his head did not turn. I think that made me angrier than if he had insulted me; what the hell was going on? Oh, excuse me, but that was what I was thinking, and I hope you'll pardon the profanity, but I want to get this across just as it happened.

Are you listening?

Though I shoved between an apoplectic man in a Tyrolean hat and a gaggle of high school girls, when disembarking, though I nudged and elbowed and shoved them, just desperately *fighting* to be recognized, no one paid me the slightest heed. I even—I'm so ashamed now that I think of it—I slapped one of the girls on her, uh, her behind, so to speak. But she went right on talking about some fellow who was far out of it, or something like that.

It was most frustrating, you can imagine.

The elevator operator in my office building was asleep—well, not *quite*, but Wolfgang (that's his name, and he's not even German, isn't that annoying?) always *looked* as though he was sleeping—in his cage. I prodded him, and capered about him, and as a final resort cuffed him on the ear but he continued to lie there against the wall, with his eyes shut, perched on his little pull-down seat. Finally, in annoyance, I took the elevator up myself, after booting him out onto the lobby tiles. By then I had realized, of course, that whatever strange malady had befallen me, I was to all intents and purposes, invisible. It seemed impossible that even if I were invisible, that people should not notice their backsides being slapped, or their bodies being kicked onto the tiles, or their elevators stolen, but apparently such was precisely the case.

I was so confused by then—but oddly enough, not in the slightest terrified—I was half belligerent, and half pixilated with my own limitless abilities. Visions of movie stars and great wealth danced before my eyes.

And disappeared as rapidly.

What good were women or wealth if there was no one to share it with you? Even the women. So the thoughts of being the greatest bank robber in history passed from me, and I resigned myself to getting out—if out was the proper term—getting out of this predicament.

I left the elevator on the twenty-sixth floor, and walked down the hall to the office door. It read the same as it had read for twenty-seven years:

*Rames & Klaus* Diamond Appraisers JEWELRY EXPERTS

I shoved open the door, and for a second my heart leaped in my throat that perhaps till now it had all been a colossal hoax. For Fritz Klaus—big, red-faced Fritz with the small mole beside his mouth—was screaming at me.

“Winsocki! You dolt! How many times have I told you when they go back in the pinch-bags, pull tight the cords! A hundred thousand dollars on the floor for the scrubwoman! Winsocki! You imbecile!”

But he was not screaming at me. He was screaming, that was all. But really, it was no surprise. Klaus and George Rames never actually talked to me...or even bothered to shout at me. They knew I did my

job—had, in fact, been doing it for twenty-seven years—with method and attentiveness, and so they took me for granted. The shouting was all part of the office.

Klaus just had to scream. But he was directing his screams at the air, not at me. After all, how *could* he be screaming at me? I wasn't even there.

He went down on his knees, and began picking up the little uncut rough diamonds he had spilled, and when he had them all, he went down farther on his stomach, so his vest was dirtied by the floor, and looked under my bench.

When he was satisfied, he got up and brushed himself off...and walked away. As far as he knew, I was working. Or in his view of the world, was I just eliminated? It was a puzzler, but no matter...I was not there. I was gone.

I turned around and went back down the hall.

The elevator was gone.

I had to wait a long time till I could get to the lobby.

No cars would stop for my ring.

I had to wait till someone else on that floor wanted down.

That was when the real horror of it all hit me.

How strange...

I had been quiet all my life. I had married quietly and lived quietly and now, I had not even the one single pleasure of dying with a bang. Even that had been taken from me. I had just sort of snuffed out like a candle. How or why or when was no matter. I had been robbed of that one noise I had thought was mine, inevitable as taxes. But even that had been deprived me. I was a shadow...a ghost in a real world. And for the first time in my life, all the bottled-up frustrations I had never known were banked inside me, burst forth. I was shocked through and down with horror, but instead of crying, I did not cry.

I hit someone. I hit him as hard as I could. In the elevator there. I hit him full in the face, and I felt his nose skew over, and blood ran darkly on his face, and my knuckles hurt, and I hit him again, so my hand would slide in the blood, because I was Albert Winsocki and they had taken away my dying. They had made me quieter still. I had never bothered anyone, and I was hardly noticed, and when I would finally have had someone mourn for me, and notice me, and think about me as myself alone...I had been robbed!

I hit him a third time, and his nose broke.

He never noticed.

He left the elevator, covered with blood, and never even flinched.

Then I cried.

For a long time. The elevator kept going up and down with me in it, and no one heard me crying.

Finally, I got out and walked the streets till it was dark.

Two weeks can be a short time.

If you are in love. If you are wealthy and seek adventure. If you have no cares and only pleasures. If you are healthy and the world is fine and alive and beckoning. Two weeks can be a short time.

Two weeks.

Those next two weeks were the longest in my life. For they were hell. Alone. Completely, agonizingly alone, in the midst of crowds. In the neon heart of town I stood in the center of the street and shrieked at the passing throngs. I was nearly run down.

Two weeks of wandering, sleeping where I wanted to sleep—park benches, the honeymoon suite at the Waldorf, my own bed at home—and eating where I wanted to eat—I took what I wanted; it wasn't stealing, precisely; if I hadn't eaten, I would have starved—yet it was all emptiness.

I went home several times, but Alma was carrying on just nicely without me. Carrying on was the word. I would never have thought Alma could do it, particularly with the weight she had put on the past few years...but there he was.

George Rames. My boss. I corrected myself...my ex-boss.

So I felt no real duty to home and wife.

Alma had the house and she had Zasu. And, it appeared, she had George Rames. That fat oaf!

By the end of two weeks, I was a wreck. I was unshaved, and dirty, but who cared? Who could see me...or would have cared had they been able to!

My original belligerence had turned into a more concrete antagonism toward everyone. Unsuspecting people in the streets were pummeled by me as I passed, should the inclination strike me. I kicked women and slapped children...I was indifferent to the moans and cries of those I struck. What was their pain compared to *my* pain—especially when none of them cried. It was all in my mind. I actually *craved* a scream or whine from one of them. For such an evidence of pain would have been a reminder that I was in their ken, that at least I existed.

But no such sound came.

Two weeks? Hell! Paradise Lost!

It was a little over two weeks from the day Zasu had snubbed me, and I had more or less made my home in the lobby of the St. Moritz-On-The-Park. I was lying there on a couch, with a hat I had borrowed from a passerby over my eyes, when that animal urge to strike out overcame me. I swung my legs down, and shoved the hat back on my head. I saw a man in a trenchcoat leaning against the cigar counter, reading a newspaper and chuckling to himself. That cruddy dog, I thought, what the hell is *he* laughing about?

It so infuriated me, I got up and lunged at him. He saw me coming and sidestepped. I, of course, expected him to go right on reading even when I swung on him, and his movement took me by surprise. I went into the cigar case and it caught me in the stomach, knocking the wind from me.

"Ah-ah, buddy," the man in the trenchcoat chastised me, wagging a lean finger in my face. "Now that isn't polite at all, is it? To hit a man who can't even see you."

He took me by the collar and the seat of my pants and threw me across the lobby. I went flailing through a rack of picture postcards, and landed on my stomach. I slid across the polished floor and brought up against the revolving door.

I didn't even feel the pain. I sat up, there on the floor, and looked at him. He stood there with his hands on his hips, laughing uproariously at me. I stared, and my mouth dropped open. I was speechless.

"Catching flies, buddy?"

I was so amazed, I left my mouth open.

"Y-you, you can *see* me!" I was whooping. "You can *see* me!"

He gave a rueful little snort, and turned away. "Of course I can." He started to walk away, then stopped and said, over his shoulder, "You don't think I'm one of *them*, do you?" He crooked his thumb at the people rushing about in the lobby.

It had never dawned on me.

I had thought I was alone in this thing.

But here was another, like me!

Not for a second did I consider the possibility that he could see me where the others could not, and still be a part of their world. It was apparent from the moment he threw me across the lobby that he was in the same predicament *I* was. But somehow, he seemed more at ease about it all. As though this were one great party, and he the host.

He started to walk away.

I scrambled to my feet as he was pressing the button for the elevator, wondering why he was doing that. The elevator couldn't stop

for him if it was human-operated, as I'd seen it was.

"Uh, hey! Wait a minute there—"

The elevator came down, and an old man with baggy pants was running it. "I was on six, Mr. Jim. Heard it and come right down."

The old man smiled at the man in the trenchcoat—Jim it was—and Jim clapped him on the shoulder. "Thanks, Denny. I'd like to go up to my room."

I started after them, but Jim gave Denny a nudge, and inclined his head in my direction, with a disgusted expression on his face. "Up, Denny," he said.

The elevator doors started to close. I ran up.

"Hey! Wait a second. My name is Winsocki. Albert Winsocki, like the song. *You* know, buckle down Win—"

The doors closed almost on my nose.

I was frantic. The only other person (*persons*, I realized with a start) who could see me, and they were going away...I might search and never find them.

I was so frantic, in fact, I almost missed the easiest way to trace them. I looked up and the floor indicator arrow was going up, up, up to stop at the tenth floor. I waited till another elevator came down, with the ones who could not see me in it, and tossed out the operator...and took it up myself.

I had to search all through the corridors of the tenth floor till I heard his voice through a door, talking to the old man.

He was saying, "One of the newer ones, Denny. A boor, a completely obnoxious lower form of life."

And Denny replied, "Chee, Mr. Jim, I just like to sit an' hear ya talk. Wit' all them college words. I was real unhappy till you come along, ya know?"

"Yes, Denny, I know." It was a condescending tone of voice if ever I'd heard one.

I knew he'd never open the door, so I went looking for the maid from that floor. She had her ring of keys in her apron, and never even noticed me taking them. I started back for the room, and stopped.

I thought a moment, and ran back to the elevator. I went downstairs and climbed into the booth where the bills were paid, where all the cash was stored. I found what I was after in one of the till drawers. I shoved it into my coat pocket, and went back upstairs.

At the door I hesitated. Yes, I could still hear them babbling. I used the master key to get inside.

When I threw open the door, the man named Jim leaped from the bed and glared at me. "What are you doing in here? Get out at once,

or I shall *throw* you out!"

He started toward me.

I pulled what I had gotten from the till drawer from my pocket, and pointed it at him. "Now just settle back, Mr. Jim, and there won't be any trouble."

He raised his hands very melodramatically, and shuffled backward till his knee-backs caught the edge of the bed and he sat down with a plop.

"Oh, take down your hands," I said. "You look like a bad western movie." His hands came down self-consciously.

Denny looked at me. "What's he doin', Mr. Jim?"

"I don't know, Denny; I don't know," Jim said slowly, with thought. His eyes were trained on the barrel of the snub-nosed revolver I held. His eyes were frightened.

I found myself shaking. I tried to hold the revolver steady, but it wavered in my hand as though I were inside the eye of a tornado. "I'm nervous, fellow," I said, partly to let him note it, as if he hadn't already, and half to reassure myself that I was master of the situation. "Don't make me any worse than I am right now."

He sat very still, his lowered hands folded in his lap.

"For two weeks now, I've been close to going insane. My wife couldn't see or hear or feel me. No one in the street could. No one for two weeks. It's like I'm dead...and today I found you two. You're the only ones like me! Now I want to know what this is all about. What's happened to me?"

Denny looked at Mr. Jim, and then at me.

"Hey is he cuckoo, Mr. Jim? You want I should slug him, Mr. Jim?"

The old man would never have made it.

Jim saw that much, to his credit.

"No, Denny. Sit where you are. The man wants some information. I think it's only fair I give it to him." He looked at me. His face was soft, like a sponge.

"My name is Thompson, Mr—ah—Mr. what-did-you-say-your-name-was?"

"I didn't, but it's Winsocki. Albert Winsocki. Like in the song. You remember the song, yeah?"

"Oh yes; Mr. Winsocki. Well." His poise and sneering manner were returning as he saw he at least had the edge on me in information. "The reason for your current state of non-noticeability—you aren't really insubstantial, you know—that gun could kill me...a truck could run us down and we'd be dead—the reason is very complex. I'm afraid I can't give you any scientific explanations, and I'm not even sure



there are any. Let's put it this way..."

He crossed his legs, and I steadied the gun on him. He went on. "There are forces in the world today, Mr. Winsocki, that are invisibly working to make us all carbon copies of one another. Forces that crush us into molds of each other. You walk down the street and never see anyone's face, really. You sit faceless in a movie, or hidden from sight in a dreary living room watching television. When you pay bills, or car fares or talk to people, they see the job they're doing, but never you.

"With some of us, this is carried even farther. We are so unnoticeable about it—wallflowers, you might say—all through our lives, that when these forces that crush us into one mold work enough to get us where they want us, we just—poof!—disappear to all those around us. Do you understand?"

I stared at him.

I knew what he was talking about, of course. Who could fail to notice it in this great machined world we'd made for ourselves. So that was it. I had been made like everyone else, but had been so negative a personality to begin with, it had completely blanked me out to everyone. It was like a filter on a camera. Put a red filter on and everything red was there—but not there. That was the way with me. The cameras in everyone had been filtered against me. And Mr. Jim, and Denny, and—

"Are there more like us?"

Mr. Jim spread his hands. "Why, there are dozens, Winsocki. Dozens. Soon there will be hundreds, and then thousands. With things going the way they are...with people buying in supermarkets and eating in drive-ins and this new subliminal TV advertising...why, I'd say we could be expecting more company all the time.

"But not me," he added.

I looked at him, and then at Denny. Denny was blank, so I looked back at Thompson. "What do you mean?"

"Mr. Winsocki," he explained patiently, but condescendingly, "I was a college professor. Nothing really brilliant, mind you, in fact I suppose I was dullness personified to my students. But I knew my subject. Phoenician Art, it was. But my students came in and went out and never saw me. The faculty never had cause to reprimand me, and so after a while I started to fade out. Then I was gone, like you.

"I wandered around, as you must still be doing, but soon I realized what a fine life it was. No responsibility, no taxes, no struggling for existence. Just live the way I wish, and take what I want. I even have Denny here—he was a handyman no one paid attention to—as my friend and manservant. I like this life, Mr. Winsocki. That was why I

was not too anxious to make your acquaintance. I dislike seeing the status quo upset.”

I realized I was listening to a madman.

Mr. Jim Thompson had been a poor teacher, and had suffered my fate. But where I had been turned—as I now realized—from a Milquetoasted hum-drummer to a man cunning enough to find a revolver and adventurous enough to use it, he had been turned into a monomaniac.

This was his kingdom.

But there were others.

Finally, I saw there was no point talking to him. The forces that had cupped us and crushed us till we were so small the rest of the world could not see us, had done their work all too well on him. He was lost. He was satisfied with being unseen, unheard, unknown.

So was Denny. They were complacent. More than that...they were overjoyed. And during this past year I have found many like them. All the same. But I am not like that. I want out of here. I want you to see me again.

I’m trying desperately, the only way I know how.

It may sound stupid, but when people are daydreaming, or unfocused on life, so to speak, they may catch sight of me. I’m working on that. I keep whistling and humming. Have you ever heard me? The song is “Buckle Down Winsocki.”

Have you ever caught sight of me, just out of the corner of your eye, and thought it was a trick of your imagination?

Have you ever thought you heard a radio or TV playing that song, and there was no radio or TV?

Please! I’m begging you! Listen for me. I’m right here, and I’m humming in your ear so you’ll hear me and help me.

“Buckle Down Winsocki,” that’s the tune. Can you hear it?

Are you listening?

—New York, 1958

## S.R.O.

Bart Chester was walking down Broadway when it materialized out of black nothing.

He was giving Eloise the line, with the, “No, honest to God, Eloise, I mean if you come over to my place, we’ll have just *one*—s’help me, just *one*—then we’ll be off to the show.” He was acutely aware there might not be any show that night, chiefly because there was no money that night, but Eloise didn’t know that. She was a sweet girl and Bart didn’t want to spoil her with luxuries.

Bart was just figuring mentally how many it would take to get Eloise’s mind off a show and onto more earthy matters, when the whine began.

Like a thousand generators spinning at top-point efficiency the sound crawled up the stone walls encasing Times Square; bouncing back and back, reverberating thunderously amid the noise of Broadway, causing heads to turn, eyes to lift.

Bart Chester turned his head, lifted his eyes, and was one of the first to see it shimmer into existence. The air seemed to pinken and waver, like heat lightning far off. Then the air ran like water. It may have been in the eyes, or actually in the air, but the air did run like water.

The sly gleam faded from Bart Chester’s eyes, and he never did get that “little one” with Eloise. He turned away from her splendid charms, realizing, knowing, sensing that he had a place in what was coming. Others must have felt the same way: traffic on the sidewalks was slowing, people turning to stare into the evening darkness.

The coming was rapid. The air quivered a bit more, and a form began to take shape, as a ghost emerging from mist. The shape was long, and cylindrical, protruberant and shining. It materialized over Times Square.

Bart took three rapid steps to the edge of the sidewalk, his eyes searching into the glare of neon, trying to see more of that weird structure. People jostled him and a knot began to form, as though he were a catalyst for some chemical action.

The thing (and Bart Chester had been in show business too long to jump at snap labels) hung there, suspended by hangings of nothing, as if waiting. It stretched up, out between the trench of buildings,

towering a good ten feet over the tallest one. The structure—whatever it was—appeared to be over nine hundred feet high. It hung above the ground, over the traffic island dividing Broadway and Seventh Avenue, the flickering of a million lights coloring its smooth tube body.

Even as he watched, the seemingly unbroken skin of the structure parted and a flat plate emerged from a circular aperture. The plate was dotted with small holes, and in another instant a thousand metallic filaments pushed through the holes. Rigidly, they vibrated in the air.

Newspaper stories of the last few years, coupled with a natural childlike credulity, joined. *Migod*, thought Chester, and somehow knew his assumption was correct, *they're testing the atmosphere!* When he had said this to himself, the greater implication struck him: *it's a spaceship! That—that thing came from another planet! Another planet?*

It had been many months since the Emery Bros. Circus, in which Bart had sunk all his ready cash, had folded. It had been many months since Bart had paid his rent, and not many less since he'd had three full meals in one twenty-four-hour period. He was desperately looking for an angle. Any angle!

Then, with the blood of the innate entrepreneur coursing through him, beating fiercely, a running torrent of greed as hot as lava, he thought joyously: *Good God, what an attraction this would make!*

Concessions. Balloons saying "Souvenir of the Spaceship." Popcorn, peanuts, Cracker Jacks, binoculars, pennants! Food! Hot dogs, candied apples; what a pitch! What a perfect pitch!

*If I can get to it first*, he added, mentally clicking his fingers.

He hardly saw the wildly gesturing policeman using his call box. He hardly heard the mixed screams and murmurs of the thronging crowds watching the metal filaments weaving their patterns. He elbowed back through the crowd.

Faintly, through the rising crowd noise, he heard Eloise moaning his name. "Sorry, baby," he yelled over his shoulder, putting his elbow into a fat woman's diaphragm, "but I've been hungry too long to pass up a sweet deal like this!

"Excuse me, ma'am. Pa'rm me, Mac. Excuse me, I'd like to get—uh—through here. Uh! Thanks, Mac," and he was at the drugstore door. He adjusted his bow tie for a moment, muttering low to himself, "Ohboyohboyohboy! Just looka this, little Bartie Chester! You're gonna make a millyun bucks! Yessir!"

He scrabbled for change as he slid into the booth. In another few minutes he had placed the long-distance call collect—to Mrs. Charles Chester in Wilmington, Delaware. He heard the phone ringing at the

other end, then his mother's voice, "Yes, hello?" and he started to say, "Hey! Ma!" but the operator's voice cut through.

"Will you accept the charges, Mrs. Chester?"

When she had said yes, Bart threw himself into it. "Hello, hello, Ma! How ya?"

"Why, Bart, how wonderful to hear from you. It's been so long! Just those few postcards!"

"Yeah, yeah, I know, Ma," he cut her off, "but things have been really jumpin' for me here in New York. Look, Ma, I need some money."

"Well...how much, Bart? I can let you have..."

"I'll need a couple hunnerd, Ma. It's the biggest—so help me God—the *biggest* goddam deal I ever—"

"*Bart!* Your language! And to your mother!"

"Sorry, Ma, really sorry, but this is so hot it's burnin' my pinkies! Honest to—" he caught himself quickly, "—gosh! Ma, I need the dough like I never did before. I can get it back to you in a few months, Ma! Pleeze, Ma! I never asked ya for nothin' before!"

The next two minutes were a gradual wearing-down period in which Mrs. Charles Chester promised to go to the bank and get the last two hundred in sight. Bart thanked her most graciously. He ignored the operator's snide interjections to his mother about waiting for charges *she* would have to pay, then he was off the line and back on another.

"Hello, Erbie? This is Bart. Look, I got a deal on that is without a doubt the most—*wait* a minute, for Christ's sake, willya—this is the greatest thing ever hit the—"

Five minutes and five hundred dollars later: "Sandy, baby? Who's *this*? Who ya think? This's Bart! Bart Ches—HEY! don't hang up! This is a chance for you to make a millyun; a sweet honest-to-God millyun! Now here's what I want. I wanta borrow from you—"

Fifteen minutes, six phone calls, and four thousand five hundred and twenty dollars later, Bart Chester bolted from the drug store, just in time to see the tentacled plate receding into the ship, the skin closing again.

Eloise was, of course, gone. Bart didn't even notice.

The crowds were by this time overflowing into the streets—though everyone was careful not to get under the structure—and traffic was blocked to a standstill all up the avenue. Motorists were perched on car hoods, watching the machine.

Fire trucks had been drawn up, somehow. Rubber-overcoated

firemen stood about biting their lower lips and shaking their heads ineffectually. *I've gotta get in there; get the edge on any other promoters!* Visions of overflowing coffers of gold danced in Bart Chester's head.

As he was pushing through the crowd, back to the curb, he saw the police cordon forming. The beefy, spectacled cop was joining hands with a thin, harassed-looking bluecoat, as Chester got to them.

"Sorry, buddy, you can't go in there. We're shooing everyone out now," the fat officer said, over his shoulder.

"Look, officer, I *gotta* get in there." At the negative shake from the cop, Chester exploded, "Look—I'm Bart Chester! You know, Star Cavalcade of 1954, the Emery Bros. Circus—I produced 'em! I got to get in there!" He could tell he was making no impression whatsoever.

"Look, you've got to—Hey! Inspector! Hey, over here!" He waved frantically, and the short man in the drab overcoat paused as he headed toward the squad car pool.

Taking care not to step on the microphone cables being laid along the street, he walked toward the crowd. Chester said to the cops, "Look, I'm a friend of Inspector Kesselman. Inspector," he said imploringly, "I've got to get in there. It's real important. Maybe a promotion!"

Kesselman began to shake his head no, then he looked at Chester with narrowed eyes for a moment, remembering free tickets to fights, and reluctantly bobbed his head in agreement. "Okay, come on," he said, with obvious distaste, "but stay close."

Chester ducked under the restraining arms of the cops, following the little man around the shadow of the structure.

"How's the promoting business, Chester?" asked the Inspector as they walked.

Bart felt his head grow light and begin to float off his shoulders. *That* was precisely the trouble: "Lousy," he said.

"Come over some night for dinner, if you get the time," added the Inspector, in a tone that suggested Bart turn down the invite.

"Thanks," said Bart, carefully walking around the huge machine's shadow in the street.

"Is it a spaceship?" asked Chester, in almost a childlike tone. Kesselman turned and looked at him strangely.

"Where in Hell did you get *that* idea from?" he asked.

Chester shrugged his shoulders, "Oh, just them comic books I been readin'." He smiled lopsidedly.

"You're crazy," said Kesselman, shaking his head as he turned away.

Two hours later, when the last firemen had come down from the ladders, shaken their heads in failure and said, "Sorry, these acetylene torches don't even get the metal smoky," and walked away, Kesselman still looked at Chester with annoyance and said, "You're crazy."

An hour later, when they had ascertained definitely that machine gun bullets did not even dent the structure, he was less sure, but he refused to call the scientists Chester suggested. "Goddammit, Chester, this is *my* business, not yours, now either you keep your trap shut, or I'll boot you out beyond the cordon!" He gestured meaningfully at the throbbing crowds straining against the joined hands of the police. Chester subsided, confident they would do as he had suggested, eventually.

Eventually was one hour and fifty minutes later when Kesselman threw up his hands in despair and said, "Okay, get your goddam experts in here, but do it fast. This thing might settle any minute.

"Or," he added sarcastically, looking at the grinning Bart Chester, "if there's monsters in this thing, they may start eating us any minute now."

It was a spaceship. Or at any rate, it was from *someplace* else.

The gray-faced scientists clucked knowingly to each other for a while; one of the braver experts climbed a fire ladder and tested the ship in some incomprehensible manner, and then they concurred.

"It is our opinion," said the scientist with the three snatches of hair erupting from an otherwise bald head, "that this vehicle—am I speaking clearly enough for you reporters?—this vehicle is from somewhere off Earth. Now whether," he pointed out, while the others nodded in agreement, "this is a spaceship, or as seems more likely from the manner in which it appeared, a dimension-spanning device, I am not certain.

"But," he concluded, making washing movements with his hands, "it is definitely of extraterrestrial origin." He spelled the six-syllable word, and the reporters went whooping off to the telephones.

Chester grabbed Kesselman by the arm. "Look, Inspector, who has say-so—jurisdikshun—you know—over this thing? I mean, who would have say-so about entertainment rights and like that?" Kesselman was looking at him as though he were insane. Chester started another sentence, but the screams from the crowd drowned him out. He looked up quickly.

The skin of the spaceship was opening again.

By the time the crowds had streamed into the crosstown streets,

terror was universally mirrored on every face, but mingled with an overwhelming sense of the wonder of it all. New Yorkers were once again torn between their native desire to watch, and a fear of the unknown.

Chester and the stubby-legged Inspector found themselves walking backward, taking short steps, fearful steps, as they looked upward. *Don't let them be monsters*, Chester was almost praying. *Or that beautiful meal-ticket'll be knocked off by the militia!*

The spaceship was motionless; it had not altered its original position by an inch. But a platform was extending. A transparent platform, so clear and so thin, it seemed almost invisible. Six hundred feet up the ship's length, between two huge ribbed knobs extending as though they were growths, the platform slid out over Times Square.

"Get some guns on that thing!" bellowed Kesselman at his men. "Get up in those buildings!" He pointed at two skyscrapers between which the spaceship hovered.

Chester stared at the ship in fascination as the platform extended—then stopped. As he watched, a note was sounded. It rose in his mind, audibly, yet soundlessly. He cocked his head to one side, listening. He could see the police, and slowly returning pedestrians, doing the same. "Whutzat?" he asked.

The sound built, climbing from the hollow arch at the bottom of his feet, to the last inch of each strand of hair on his head. It overwhelmed him and his sight dimmed for a moment, to be replaced by bursting lights and flickering shadows. In an instant his vision cleared, but he knew it had been a preamble. He knew—again without reason—the sound had come from the ship. He turned his eyes to the platform once more, just in time to see the lines begin their forming.

He could never quite describe what they were, and the only thing he knew for certain was that they were beautiful. The lines were suspended in air and of colors he had never known existed. They were parallel and crossed streamers that lived between the reds and blues of Earth. They were alien to his sight, yet completely arresting. He could not take his eyes from their wavering, shifting, formations.

Then the colors began to seep. Like running paints the lines melted, forming, forming, forming in the air above the platform. The colors intermingled and blended; soon a backdrop of shades blotted out the skin of the ship.

"What—what is it?" he heard Kesselman ask, faintly.

Before he could answer, *they* came out.

The beings appeared and stood silent for an instant. They were all different in bodily appearance, yet somehow Chester knew they were all alike underneath. As though they had donned coverings. In the



instant they stood there, motionless, he knew each by name. The purple-furred one on the left, he was Vessilio. The one with stalks growing where his eyes should have been, he was Davalier. The others, too, all bore names, and oddly, Chester knew each one intimately. They did not repulse him, for all their alienness. He knew Vessilio was stalwart and unflinching in the face of duty. He knew Davalier was a bit of a weakling, prone to crying in private. He knew all this and more. He *knew* each one, personally.

Yet they were all monstrous. Not one was shorter than forty feet. Their arms—when they had arms—were well-formed and properly sized for their bodies. Their legs, heads, torsos the same. But few had arms and legs and torsos. One was a snail-shape. Another seemed to be a ball of coruscating light. A third changed form and line even as Chester watched, pausing an instant in a strangely unidentifiable middle stage.

Then they began moving.

Their bodies positioned and swayed. They moved around one another, intricately. Chester found himself enthralled. They were magnificent! Their motions, their actions, their attitudes in relation to one another, were glorious. More, they told a story. A deeply interesting story.

The lines shifted, the merged colors changed. The aliens went through involved panoramas of descriptive motion.

Not for a second did Chester consider he might stop watching them. They were something so alien, so different, yet so compelling, he knew he must watch them or forever lose the knowledge they were imparting with their movements.

When the soundless note had sounded again, the colors had faded, the aliens were gone and the platform had slid back, the spaceship was quiet and faceless once more. Chester found himself breathing with difficulty. They had been—well, literally breathtaking!

He glanced at the huge clock on the Times Building. Three hours had elapsed in the space of a second.

The murmurs of the crowd, the strange applause for a performance they could not have fully understood, the feel of Kesselman's hand on his arm, all faded away. He heard the Inspector's voice, so whispery in his ear, "Good Lord, how marvelous!" Even that was out of his range now.

He knew, as he had known everything else, just what the ship was, who the aliens were, what they were doing on Earth. He heard himself saying it, quietly, almost with reverence:

"That was a play. They're actors!"

They *were* magnificent, and New York learned it only shortly before the rest of the world got wind of the news. Hotels and shops suddenly found themselves deluged by the largest tourist crowds in years. The city teemed with thousands of visitors, drawn from all over the Earth, who wished to witness the miracle of The Performance.

The Performance was always the same. The aliens came out onto their platform—their stage, really—every evening at precisely eight o'clock. They were finished by eleven.

During the three hours they maneuvered and postured, they filled their appreciative audiences with mixtures of awe and love and suspense such as no other acting group had ever been able to do.

Theaters in the Times Square area were forced to cancel their evening performances. Many shows closed, many switched to matinee runs and prayed. The Performance went on.

It was uncanny. How each person who watched enraptured could find identification, find meaning; though everyone saw something a little different; though no words were spoken; though no comprehensible motions were made.

It was uncanny. How they could see the actors do the exact same things, over and over, each Performance, and never tire of it—come back to see it again. It was uncanny, yet beautiful. New York took The Performance to its heart.

After three weeks, the army was called away from the ship—which had done nothing but produce The Performance regularly each evening—to quell a prison riot in Minnesota. In five weeks Bart Chester had made all the necessary arrangements, shoestring-fashion, and was praying things wouldn't fizzle as they had with the Emery Bros. Circus. He was still going without meals, moaning to those who would listen, "What a lousy racket this is—but I got a deal on now that's—"

In seven weeks Bart Chester had begun to make his first million.

No one would pay to watch The Performance, of course. Why should they when they could stand in the streets and see it? But there was still the unfathomable "human nature" factor with which to contend.

There were still those who would rather sit in a gilded box seat, balcony style, hung from the outside of a metropolitan skyscraper (insured by Lloyd's, to be sure!), than stand in a gutter.

There were still those who felt that popcorn and chocolate-covered almonds made preparation of watching more pleasant. There were still those who felt the show was *common* if they did not have a detailed

program.

Bart Chester, whose stomach had begun to bulge slightly beneath his new charcoal-gray suit, took care of those things.

*Bart Chester Presents* flowed in elegant script across the top of the programs, and beneath it, simply, *The Performance*. It was rumored up and down the street that Bart Chester was the new Sol Hurok, and a man which it is whom we must all definitely watch!

During the first eight months of *The Performance*, he made back all the borrowed money he had invested in building-face leases and construction work. Everything from there on out was reasonably clear profit. The confection and souvenir concessions he leased for a fifty percent cut of the gross to the people who supplied ball games and wrestling matches.

*The Performance* went on, regularly, as an unquestionable smash hit.

*VARIETY* said: ETs SOCKO IN PLUSH REVUE!

The *Times* was no less ebullient with its praise:

"...We found *The Performance* on Times Square as refreshing and captivating at its first anniversary as it was on its opening night. Even the coarse commercial interests which have infected it could not dim the superlativeness of the..."

Bart Chester counted his receipts and smiled; and grew just a little fat for the first time in his life.

The two thousand, two hundred and eighty-ninth *Performance* was as brilliant and as satisfying as the first, the hundredth, or the thousandth. Bart Chester sat back in his plush seat, only vaguely aware of the stunning girl beside him. Tomorrow she would be back, trying to get a break in some off-Broadway production, but tomorrow *The Performance* would still be there, pouring money into his pockets.

The major part of his mind concentrated, held in awe and wonder at the intricacy and glory of the actors' movements. A minor segment was thinking, as it always did with him.

*Wonderful! Marvelous! A true spec'tacle like The New Yorker said! All around him, like perspiration on a huge beast, the Chester Balconies clung to their buildings. The inexpensive seats between 45th and 46th Streets, the higher-priced boxes festooning façades all the way up to the Times Building. One of these days those slobs'll break down and I'll be able to build on the Times, too!* he thought.

*Over six years; what a run! Beats South Pacific! Dammit, wish I could have made all that in gate receipts.*

He frowned mentally, thinking of all the people watching from the streets. For free! The crowds were still as huge as the first day. People

never seemed to tire of seeing the play. Over and over they watched it, enraptured, deep in it, not even noticing the flow of time. The Performance always satisfied, always enchanted.

*They're fabulous players*, he thought. *Only...*

The thought was half-formed. Nebulous. Annoying, but strangely strangely annoying—there was no reason why he should feel qualms.

*Oh well.*

He concentrated on the play. It really took little concentration, for the actors spoke directly to the mind; their charming appeal was to a deeper and clearer well than mere appreciation.

He was not even aware when the tone of the play changed. At one point the actors were performing a strangely exotic minuet of movement. A second later, they were all down near the front of the platform.

"That isn't in the play!" he said, incredulously, the mood broken. The beautiful girl beside him grabbed at his sleeve.

"What d'ya mean, Bart?" she asked.

He shook her hand off in annoyance. "I've seen this show hunnerds of times. Right here they all get around that little humpbacked bird-thing and stroke it. What're they staring at?"

He was correct. The actors were looking down at their audience who had begun to applaud nervously, sensing something was wrong. The aliens watched with stalks, with cilia, with eyes. They were staring at the people in the streets, on the balconies, seeming to see them for the first time since they'd arrived. Something was very wrong. Chester had felt it first—perhaps because he had been there from the beginning. The crowds were beginning to sense it also. They were milling in the streets, uncertainly.

Chester found his voice tight and high as he said, "There's—there's something *wrong*! What're they doing?"

When the platform sank slowly down the face of the ship, till finally one of the actors stepped off into the empty space beside the machine, he began to realize.

It was only after the first few moments, when the horror of the total carnage he knew was coming had worn off, he found himself staring fascinated as the little, forty-foot, humpbacked bird-thing strode through Times Square, that he knew.

It had been a wonderful show, and the actors had appreciated the intense interest and following of their audience. They had lived off the applause for over six years. They were artists without a doubt.

And up to a point, they had *starved* for their art.

# WORLDS TO KILL

## I

Clasping the jeweled hilt of the stone kris with both hands, the Rt. Rev. Mr. Push, exalted high priest of the One Authentic Temple of God, Inc., raised it slowly heavenward, point downward, perfectly straight and parallel to his naked and painted body. When his extended elbows formed the outside points of a diamond, and the brown-stained blade was just above his head, he began to intone the sacred litany. The sound of it was picked up by the loudspeaker mike hanging around his neck, and was thrown out across the great stadium.

Even so, it was difficult making out the words where the cripple sat, across the huge tiered bowl, in the 2.50 seats. A candy butcher was shrieking, "Koola! Frynuts! Cold Koola! Hot Frynuts!" at the end of his row, and the high priest's sacred sing-song was drowned out by the commercial.

Hunkered down, legless, on his rolling cart, the leather-tanned man lifted the binoculars to his eyes again, and sighted across the bowl to the sacrificial altar, trying to lip-synch the few words he was able to make out, with the precise mouth movements of the high priest.

The litany came to an end and the crowd shouted its responses with religious enthusiasm. The legless man on the cart tracked the binoculars rapidly across the crowd, and then brought their unblinking sight back to the high priest as he arched back slightly, rib cage suddenly becoming prominent with the effort, and drove straight down, hard, with the kris, into the red circle that had been painted over the naked girl's heart.

As the kris sank to the jeweled hilt the crowd roared, leaping to its feet, throwing sacrificial roses into the air.

On his cart, the cripple holstered his binoculars and finished his popcorn. The crowd blocked off his view of everything but their straining bodies. The voices went up and seemed to become too shrill to have emanated from human throats.

When the bedlam quieted, the legless man asked two of the nearest enthusiasts if they would lift his cart down off the seat. When they had set him in the aisle, he propelled himself with difficulty up

the aisle to the exit portal, and down the ramp. Behind him another virgin was being sacrificed.

Outside the stadium, scooting along smoothly with a pair of padded wooden blocks strapped over his hands, the cripple made for a freight expressway moving like quicksilver through the suburban stadium section.

Crates of goods, force-locked in position to avoid theft or spillage, hissed past him on the maximum-speed strip, as he came abreast of a checkloading station. The clocker, a man of indeterminate age chewing on a chocolate ring, did not bother to look up as the cripple propelled himself up the short metal ramp with a forceful rowing motion. But when the little cart stopped in front of the clocker's bubble—a pie-wedge opened in its force-field so he could get the dubious benefits of the sticky moist breeze blowing across the expressways—he looked down from his seat and his eyes narrowed.

"Excuse me," the cripple asked politely, "would you do me a kind of a favor, please?"

The clocker did things with his mouth, cleaning out the bits of nuts the chocolate ring had deposited between his teeth. "What?"

A short, harsh syllable.

"I, uh, can't afford a passenger slipway, and I was wondering if you'd let me ride the freightway down to the 147th Street Oval...?"

The clocker was shaking his head. "No."

"You wouldn't even have to lock me on," the cripple insisted. "I can do a thing with the wheels, they've got a vacuum base. It wouldn't be any bother."

The clocker turned away.

"I'd really appreciate it," the cripple pressed him.

The clocker turned back, eyes narrowed again, mouth hard. "Against the rules, bo, you know that. Don't wanna discuss't. Just slipaway."

The cripple's deeply tanned face grew tense, jaw muscles moved softly, and his anger extended itself through his features to his nose, which quivered like an animal's. "Some helluva way to treat a bo," he said snappishly. "How the hell you think I got shortn'd this way, you bastard! I worked the slips, same's you. Now I give both my legs and I come an' ask another workman same's I was, an' what I get? Dumped on, is what it is. You bastard, all I asked was for a ride down'ta the Oval, that such a big damn thing?"

The clocker looked shocked, and suddenly chagrined.

"Hey, I'm sorry, bo."

The cripple did not reply. He slipped the wooden blocks back on his hands and started to turn himself around. The clocker got down off

his seat, which regained its original shape, sighing softly. The clocker came and stood in front of the little cart. "No, hey, I'm really sorry, bo. It's, you know, they get you locked in with rules. Hell, I'll put you on a slip, just gimme a minute."

The cripple nodded brusquely, as though only now getting his due.

The clocker opened the access lock and walked ahead of the cart as the cripple rolled after him. The elevator dropped them down just below the level of the works, and they moved across under the maximum-speed and mid-range slipways. They came up through the loading lock between the mid-range and slow-speed slips, and the clocker got down on his knees and made ready to shove the cart onto the slowest slipway.

"Thanks," the cripple said with a smile.

The clocker made a forget-it motion with his hand, and nudged him onto the slipway. As the cripple slid away, the clocker stood up and called after him, "Hey, sorry, bo!"

Three miles down the slipway, the cripple shifted slips more adroitly than the clocker would have thought possible. He held his position on the mid-range slipway for a quarter mile, then shifted again. Now on the maximum-speed freightway, with the whining of the works making it impossible for any spy equipment of the priest's police to pick up his words, he rubbed back the flap of flesh on his right biceps that concealed the communications device, and began to report:

"Okay. Final stuff. Feed it directly to the machine. The preliminary judgments seem to be accurate. They've reached a seven stage in technology, but socially they're doing maybe four. Strong myth and religious ties. Wide open for a crash-in tactic, I think. No, make that a certainty. Couch the attack in a religious way, maybe the fall of a sun god, or a second coming kind of thing. That'll put them into a temporary panic and first penetration can be effected with minimal losses. Now I'm going to feed you the coded stuff for precision, but the one thing I couldn't code-up is the barbarism thing they've got going here. Really a bunch of animals, just under the surface. That may be our strongest weapon, so code what you can of it, and let the analyzer extrap the rest. You can get Arnak's troops ready, and tell Folger we'll need light to medium armor on the cruisers, probably nothing any heavier. Except I've got a long list of special stuff Nord'll have to rig up for particular jobs. Okay now, I'll wait for your signal for clear on the machine..."

He rode the express freightway another three miles, in silence, waiting.

When it came, it was a sharp jamming buzz, and he began to speak

in a flat, emotionless voice, into his biceps:

“Invasion ET commence ourtime five slant two five slant zero nine-er slant thirteen hundred hours...”

He had long since passed the 147th Street Oval by the time he had finished transmitting; his words had gone out through the atmosphere, directed through space in a line as straight as a thought, which was by no means straight. Curlicued and doubled-back, the transmission had been picked up by doggie stations and boosted even farther.

In another star-system altogether, the transmission had been received and acknowledged.

On the freightway, the legless cripple rose from his cart, stretched his legs and changed his clothes quickly. When he slipshifted, back down to the low-speed strip, he was dressed as a kelp fisherman in from the fields, wearing country bumpkin clothing.

He disappeared without a trace into the amusement suburb. It was twelve days histime till the planet was scheduled to die.

## II

Natives called the planet Reef. Its origins in slang went back to the first Terran explosion outward, when the immigrants, sick to death of space and wandering, had foundered on that bright planet of a blue-white star. Reef, on which they had built a world for themselves. Reef, on the verge of being invaded.

A manta was dropped down first. It sowed the winds with an alienation dust that drove every man from every other man, that sent husbands quivering from their wives and mothers from their children. The people of Reef broke into tiny communities of one frightened soul each. Then the fireballs came down, and the people trembled in fear and superstition.

Then came Folger's cruisers. The medium-class stock took out the military installations and the railheads, the shipping ports and the single space center. The lightweights ranged up and down the planet slicing communications lines, blacking out television and radio, playing search-and-destroy with any pockets of possible organized resistance (as reported by the advance scout, the legless cripple, the man known as Jared). Then the troop platforms were skimmed in, and Arnak's commandos spun their spiderwebs down, waiting for the word to dropdown. Through the early morning sky the great circular black platforms rode the winds, the cilia-thin spiderwebs hanging down like sensory-feelers of some gigantic sea creature.

The commandos waited.

The psycheprobe stations were dropped in seventy previously specified locations, hit the planet at full acceleration and shucked their protective hulls on impact. They drove straight down through



the crust of the planet; linking up in a network of overriding thought-patterns, the broadcast went out, jamming normal brain-signals.

In varying intensities the psycheprobes washed the minds of the invaded with hopelessness, shame, cowardice, depression, terror, paranoia, nausea, weariness, hunger, a desire to return to the womb, a realization that there was never, ever any such return possible for them...and back through the cycle again.

The commandos dropped.

ET of Commencement was 5/25/09/1300 hours.

In the flagship *Tempest*, Jared received the Planetary Secure signal of 5/27/09/0644 hours. It had taken forty-one hours and forty-four minutes to initiate, execute and complete the subjugation of the planet called Reef. It was the one hundred and seventy-fourth planet Jared had conquered for a client.

On the bridge of the *Tempest*, the circular hull was studded with two hundred highly sophisticated two-way viewing screens showing every phase of the securing operation.

Jared had been watching the screens; now he turned to the humanoid with the squid's head, and said softly, "Pay me."

Ram, unquestioned ruler of thirty million squid humanoids existing on a dark planet of Reef's sun, a being who had lived his life in various kinds of darkness, turned to the leathery-tanned man and his one great eye blinked quickly.

The tentacles that draped down over his chest and back twirled and fretted. "You do a magnificent job, Jared," his tentacle- semaphore twined.

"Pay me," Jared repeated.

Ram twined. "The job is not completed."

"You heard the Secure signal. You owe me the final half of your payment. Make it, Ram."

The squid-creature's rear tentacles made a plaited statement to a second squid-being near the dropshaft. Ram's lieutenant saluted with a roll, and stepped off into the dropshaft.

"He will return in a moment with the cases."

"Thank you, Ram." Jared turned back to his screens.

Ram watched him for long moments, then stepped up beside him. Jared was not a tall man; the squid-being stood a full head above him. Ram was barely capable of forming human speech, his vocal apparatus composed almost entirely of vibrating membranes. Yet he fancied himself a cosmopolite, and it pleased him to make the attempt. With a hideous parody of the speech of men, he ventured, "Yooo errr fummmm Earssss orrrrginnnyyy, hiiii mmmm towwww?"

Jared kept his eyes on screen 113, where commandos were

separating women from men into force-screened compounds. "Yes. I'm an Earthman. Originally."

But his tone was not one to encourage conversation. Had Ram been of Earth, he would have recognized the tone. But as he was not, "Whudddizziddd Iygggonnn Earsss?"

Jared turned slowly.

He stared at Ram until the alien's tentacles began a reflexive twining. He did not answer, and in a few moments Ram moved away, twining behind Jared's back, "Arrogant polyp! Mercenary!"

Ram's lieutenant lifted into view, followed by two alien squids carrying metal cases. They were set down at Ram's feet, and he was just looking up, focusing the great eye, when Jared came to him. "Open them," the leathery spacer said. Ram waggled to his lieutenant.

The lieutenant undulated the command to the two squid troopers with the caskets, at the same time handing an unscrambler to one of them. The instrument was used on the force-bead locks and the caskets hissed open pneumatically.

Jared looked down into the cases, first one, then the other.

"Thank you, Ram," he said.

"One year's production of The Metal," Ram said softly, slowly, with movements like seaweed in a gentle warm ocean current. "Enough of The Metal to light a planet for a thousand years. Enough to power a million cruisers to the edge of infinity. Enough to buy a world."

"It bought you Reef," Jared said.

"This half...and the other half...two years' production of my world. The most valuable export we have ever had. What will you do with all of it?"

Jared looked at him coldly. The silence grew. Ram turned away.

Jared took the unscrambler and thumbed in a new setting. Then without another look at The Metal within the cases, he sealed them, the lids lowering on their pneumatic rods. "Aren't you curious whether I short-changed you?" Ram waggled, his interpretation tentacle signaling wry good humor.

Jared smiled at him with a noticeable lack of warmth. "You wouldn't cheat me, Ram. You want to hire me again. To conquer Signa II."

Ram's lieutenant made a frantic movement. A movement of consternation. Ram silenced him with a wave.

The squid creature took a step toward Jared.

"Yes. Yes, I do."

Jared turned back to the screens. He pointed to screen 50. "Look, Ram. The end is coming to Reef."

On the screen the sky of Reef had turned yellow with day. In the distance the red sun was a blur. Down out of that crimson sky Ram's chosen Governor was dropping, his human body drawn up inside the soft ruff of its squid head. The one great eye, its central orb gleaming green and bright, the Governor was dropping down from a squid cruiser riding safely within an attack wedge of Jared's invasion force. The Governor was descending to take control of the conquered planet from Jared's mercenaries. His squid flesh glowed with the black and red tints of joy.

Ram's tentacles touched Jared on the shoulder.

The man who conquered worlds for a price turned half to him. Ram spoke with the intentness pattern.

"Now I have two worlds in this system. Signa II is next. Then Gola, Karthes, Vale and Kalpurnika. My people will rule the system. We lie in the center of the hub of the trade lines. Half of everything is yours as payment. Jared?"

The mercenary wore a garment very much like a tunic. His arms were bare. Now he rubbed one muscular forearm with the stiffened fingers of his other hand. He did not respond to Ram's words; there was something of unliving stone in his expression.

"I know you've done it for other worlds," Ram pressed on. "My reports on your work were thorough. That is why I came to you. I know you've done jobs for clients several times in the same system. I *need* the other five to strengthen my position in this galaxy. They'll take Reef back if—"

Jared spoke with no intonation, flat and final. "No."

"But why?"

Jared walked away from him, then.

Ram stared after him for a few moments, then stalked after him suddenly lashing out with tentacles that encircled the mercenary's waist and chest. He spun him around and hissed, "Yooo doooo sissss forrrr meeee!"

Jared's movements were almost too quick to see; grasping the thick ropes of the tentacles circling his waist in one hand, and the tentacles around his chest with the other, he dipped and spun out of their encircling grasp. Then he planted himself firmly, and contracted his body in a peculiar manner, literally lifting the squid creature off his feet, whirling and hurling him across the bridge. It was an unexpected and artful maneuver, and Ram careened through the air toward a bulkhead. At the beginning of the movement his legs and arms and tentacles had been a twisted mass, but instinctively he withdrew his body into the ruff of the squid head, and as he struck the wall his tentacles touched first, absorbing the shock. The humanoid

body dropped down out of the squid head and he touched down on the deck no more unsettled than he had been before Jared had thrown him.

Jared aimed a finger at the alien. "I took your commission for one job, one job only, Ram. I've done my job, you've paid me. The contract is fulfilled. Go take possession of your conquered province."

Ram betrayed no sign of fury at the Earthman's words. He walked quickly to the dropshaft and disappeared. The remaining squids stood immobile, as though waiting for a command from the Earthman. He did not speak.

Then the lieutenant signaled his men and they went downship after Ram.

Not long after, Jared saw the shuttle ship of Ram and his group drop out of the *Tempest*. He followed it down on screens 71-5, his face frozen without expression.

But much later, when Arnak's commandos had been withdrawn and Ram's Governor had brought in his own holding forces, Jared's face was a field of emotions, watching the wholesale slaughter in the force-screened compounds.

In a matter of hours three-fourths of the population of Reef was dead, the remaining millions already being routed to work-areas.

Jared fed the coursecomp a route back, and went away from there.

He left the screens burning, showing space and not-space, showing stars and whirling pinwheels of galaxies.

He drenched himself in the loneliness of darkness.

The cases of The Metal remained unmoved on the bridge.

Jared took no calls on the bridge; alone, watching nothing as the *Tempest* stretched itself between the scene on his last commission and the return base.

Downship, the staff found it difficult to speak to one another. They were loyal, but there were times when their employer took on assignments they could not reconcile with even their basest motives.

It was night.

It was always night.

There was seldom anything but silence in the night.

### III

Pocked, but faceless, the bulk of Jared's moon grew ever greater. Somehow, it was less a home than a return base for him. He watched it emptily, two hundred times in two hundred screens. He was compelled to close his eyes.

As they approached the snuff-out barrier that invisibly closed Jared's moon off from the rest of the universe, there on the dark edge

of nowhere, he coded the signals for entry.

The crust of the blasted moon-surface rolled back and the *Tempest* entered. The moon closed over the flagship. The rest of the rolling stock was already berthed. Jared left the ship, entered one of the dropshafts ranked to one side of the mooring docks, and was sucked up to the city level.

The core of Jared's moon had been artificially hollowed. The machine had been planted in the center. Around the core of the machine Jared's city had been built. An impregnable fortress.

He went straight to his town house, where he tore off his clothes, bathed, and let the mecks massage and relax him. Then he slept for twenty-six hours.

When he arose, he punched out breakfast, though it was artificial night in the city. All around him, above and below him, the sound of the machine, vague and satisfied, hummed in the walls. The machine was thinking. He sat on the edge of a chair and ate the breakfast.

Then he turned off the airjets that had been his bed, bathed again, and went downstairs to check what his staff had put on the memory-corders. There were six items, all coded priority.

One: a delegation from the Galactic Sodality had arrived two months previous with formal complaints to be lodged.

Two: a client from Kim. Commission: to conquer the sea-world Wah-whiting in the same solar system.

Three: a client from the Clan of Seven. Commission: to conquer the three remaining worlds in the String of Ten who would not join the Clan.

Four: an ex-client, the Ragish of Tymalle, seeking return of a portion of his payment due to an almost successful insurrection. Payment: the miracle drug Y-Kappa.

Five: a client from Bunyan IV. Commission: to conquer the woman-ruled world of Khaine in the nearby star-system.

Six: a representative of the conquered planet EElax. Commission: regain the planet for the deposed government.

He programmed them Four, Six, Three, Two, One, Five. The memorycorder assured him each of the delegations had been thoroughly searched and okayed; they had been billeted comfortably, waiting for Jared's return from the Reef job.

He sat in the office of his town house, amid the heavy oak furniture transshipped from Earth years before. He sat silently, smoking, thinking about Reef.

The slaughter had been ghastly, even greater than he had supposed—but not greater than the machine had predicted. Having fed Ram's nature, and the nature of the invasion rationale, into the machine, the prediction had been on the decimal point. The machine

was always right.

Jared remembered when he had begun organizing his invasion and conquest project. The first job, a small one, utilizing ancient (and nearly forgotten) guerrilla techniques had netted him enough capital to begin the construction of the machine. It had purchased the services of the scientific staff he needed. The first prototype of the machine had been workable enough to provide plans for the second job. And from that conquest had come the first base, and troops. The organization had expanded steadily, its reputation spreading throughout the star-groups. Ten years before, he had begun the core job on the moon of this dark star's only planet. Now, closed off and untouchable, he was sought out by hundreds of clients every year. Some he interviewed, most he turned away. Of the ones seen, only a handful ever had their propositions fed into the machine. And of those scant few, only one or two were ever taken on as clients.

But when the bargain had been struck, Jared had carried off his end without failure. One hundred and seventy-four worlds had changed hands through the world-killing talents of Jared, his troops, and his machine.

The city was now a large city, the machine had restructured itself and added to its own bulk; his equipment was the most advanced, his techniques the most effective. For hire. Jared, the world-killer. At first his price had been staggering sums in Galactic Funds. But as the years had passed, less and less he had accepted money.

One job might bring huge stores of an anti-death drug, another ownership of an ore planetoid, still another the placement of a certain government official. Random payments, random selection of clients, totally without form or direction. Only the name of Jared persisted, cloaked almost in legend, feared and hated.

Jared heard the sound of footsteps coming through the reception hall. He looked up as Denna Gill appeared at the head of the short flight of stairs leading down into the oak-beamed living room.

"Welcome back," the alien said.

He came down the stairs, his furball body atop its three long ostrich legs bobbing up and down. The two great, limpid eyes looked at Jared with concern. The alien's "face" was roughly humanoid in arrangement, but more closely approximated that of an intelligent bird in demeanor.

"You don't look well."

Jared slumped in the big armchair. He shoved the memorycorder pickup away from him. It rolled to its niche in the paneled wall, the wall opened, the machine rolled in, the panel closed. It was an Eighteenth Century living room again. "I'm just a little tired."

“How did it go?”

“Well enough, I suppose.”

“I take it the machine was correct?”

“Ram brought it right out on the decimal point.”

Gill settled down his legs till his perfectly round fuzzy head was on a level with Jared's. “You expected it.”

“Doesn't mean I had to enjoy watching it.”

“No. It doesn't mean that.”

They sat in silence for a moment. Then Jared drew in a deep breath, shifted the conversation, and asked, “This delegation from the Sodality. Who's on it?”

“Becker from Earth, Stieglitz from Alpha-C Nine, that young one, what's his name, Mosey, Morrissey...”

“Mosier, French I think; from the Crab?”

“That's the one.”

“Anyone else?”

“The usual. Representatives of frightened planets.”

“You don't sound particularly worried.”

“I fed it to the machine.”

“And?”

Gill bobbed his head in a movement of dismissal. “Unimportant.”

“I see we finally got Bunyan IV to come in.”

“We've been pushing them for three years. When you bought the cake for Cooper they had to do something. It was a nice maneuver.”

“Don't remind me of the cost.”

“But they're here, that's what counts. Think we can get what we want from them?”

“They want Khaine. They have to have it. I think they'll bite. What does the machine say?”

“No extrap on it yet.”

Jared rose. “Let's start the clown-show.”

The human and his companion walked out through the living room. Down a passage behind a concealed panel, to a monorail whose single track vanished in the dimness of a tunnel carved from the dead heart of the moon. In the little car, Jared passed his hand across a glowing plate and the monorail vehicle shot out of its berth. The trip lasted only seventy seconds, ending in a low cave where a dropshaft hissed softly.

Jared and Gill descended in the dropshaft and stepped off at the vacuum-lock behind the reception chamber. They passed through the lock and Jared swung the center-pin panel around. They entered the reception chamber.

A hundred million million reflections of themselves flooded back

at them, washed in the silvery light of the incredible diamond that was the reception chamber.

In a position where every delegate or potential client might truly be an assassin sent by a conquered world to rid the universe of the man who hired himself out to kill worlds for a price, Jared had made it as difficult as possible for the dispensers of vengeance.

His payment for the conquest of Isopia had been the nearly impossible delivery of a diamond one-eighth of a mile in diameter. A diamond from the Glass Mountains of Isopia, selected by his geologists for this purpose. Who could kill a man when there were a hundred million million possibilities?

Jared and Gill seated themselves behind the interview consoles, and Gill signaled for the first client to be dropped down to them.

The Ragish of Tymalle and his group entered from the far end of the diamond, through a panel similar to the one Jared and Gill had used. They were a long way off, but their images cascaded and slipped and bounced across the chamber. Inside a diamond, they faced Jared.

It took Jared three minutes to explain clearly why even a partial return of the payment for the conquest the Ragish had commissioned was impossible. Jared made it forcefully apparent that he took no responsibilities for the inability of a client to hold what had been won for him. The Ragish and his group departed.

He took one minute to turn down the commission of the EElaxian government-in-exile.

One minute to turn down the commission from the Clan of Seven. With a ray of hope: come see me again in four years Earthtime.

One minute to dispatch the delegation from Kim. A bogus client that had somehow passed inspection. The kill attempt was a clever one, but the three aliens were vaporized even as they released the search/seek/kill missiles from their ornate brocaded clothing.

Then the neatly-tailored group from the Galactic Sodality entered.

Becker, their spokesman, was a large-bodied man with a full white beard. He instinctively induced resonances of kindness, wisdom, honesty. Santa Claus.

Jared knew him, and distrusted him.

Though they were at the far end of the diamond, pickups in the walls bounced their voices clearly to Jared.

“Good evening,” Becker began.

“I understand you have a complaint to lodge, Mr. Becker.” Jared spoke softly, but the dismissal of protocol obviously shocked Becker.

“Why, uh, that’s why we’ve come.”

“Then let’s get to it.”

Becker called for some files from a young man behind him,



apparently Mosier of the Crab Nebula. He extended them toward Jared, far down the glimmering chamber. It was ludicrous gesture, and Becker drew back his hand. "We have specifics enumerated herein."

"Say it, Mr. Becker. My time is short."

"This policy of conquest of yours must end. We of the Galactic Sodality have come together in a spirit of peace and harmony; our purpose is to bring unity to the known universe. There have been war and conquest since man left Earth..."

"I know my history, Mr. Becker. Perhaps better than you. I've made so much of it, after all."

"Arrogance can be the death of you!"

"Hypocrisy can be yours!"

Becker stammered for a moment.

"Let me put it to you bluntly, Mr. Becker. You and your Sodality, from which in the past two years I've received applicants from nine worlds. Your spoken wish for peace is a laudable one. It may not be the best thing for me personally or commercially, but I can sympathize with it intellectually. If you get what you say you want, I'm out of business. That doesn't appeal to me particularly. But it's still a lofty concept.

"Unfortunately, you're a fraud, Mr. Becker, as is your Galactic Sodality. The nomenclature doesn't matter. Galactic Sodality. United Worlds. Planetary Nexus. I've seen them come and go. Under stress, any one of the signatories to your pact would turn on the rest of you and employ me, if they thought they had a chance of taking over the starways. Not the least of them is Earth, for which we are all supposed to harbor a deep and instinctive affection. Your ball of mud is no more honest and valuable than any other, Becker. In fact, I've had feelers from clients on Earth as regards Alpha-C Nine. Mr. Stieglitz, are you there in the group...?"

A tall, thin Niner stepped forward. His bright red flesh was pulsing with fury. "I'm here!"

"You might inquire of Mr. Becker about that. The most recent feeler was from President Spaak himself. It was done through a Swiss Neutrality Combine on Proxima-C One."

There was an immediate and heated exchange between Becker and the Niner. Jared ordered them out of the diamond.

With the warning that any attempt at mounting an attack on Jared's moon would be greeted with the same enthusiasm Jared brought to any commission he undertook.

When they were gone, the Earthman sank back in his chair. Gill watched him closely.

“Do you want to break for a while?”

Jared shook his head. “Let’s get to the meat.”

The delegation from Bunyan IV was dropped in, and made its application. Jared listened and when the delegate had concluded he fed the additional facts into the machine through the console. It came back, as he had hoped, affirmative.

“I’ll take the job.”

“At what cost?” the client asked.

“The highest possible, of course,” Jared replied.

#### *IV*

It was not that Khaine was an amazon world, nor even that women dominated. It had been made obvious, however, centuries before, that women ruled better than men. Thus, the government of Khaine was almost entirely female, with “the High” a woman elected by a combination of popular vote and computer selection. The High Irina was the current ruler of the planet: part president, part queen, part spokesman of a senate; very much a woman.

She discovered the presence of Jared on Khaine only three months hithime after he had arrived.

They trapped him in the Park of Cats, there in the center of the capital city of Khaine, Jerusalem.

A mixed male and female unit of intelligence rangers staked out the park and began moving toward the center. Jared had been posing as a nightclub comedian, a fat man with a fluffy ring of white hair that circled his head. The disguise deflated and peeled easily. He was stripped down to a skinsuit, night-black and oiled, by the time the first of the rangers found him. They were under orders to take him alive. He swung up into a tree, sending the Khainesque cats shrieking from the branches. He hurled himself forward, from tree to tree, as they tried to make out his direction in the dark.

Then they brought in the kliegs and the flamers, and burned down the trees in the direction he was heading. They had him trapped in the feather-topped trees, the lights on him, when he vanished.

High above them, against the night sky, a bright blue dot appeared, flickered for a moment, then winked out.

Jared reappeared on the left bank of the Ganges River that divided Jerusalem in two parts. He now wore a breathing apparatus over his face, and a weapons belt was slung around his waist.

He took a reading from an instrument on his wrist, then he dove into the river. Down into its polluted darkness he swam, the special light goggles allowing only the most inadequate view through the water.

Near the bottom of the River, one of the guards from the intelligence rangers caught him blipping on his screen and came up to meet him. Jared met the man with an extended trident-spear. The guard caught the steel in his chest and disappeared tumbling awkwardly into the darkness.

Jared found the waterlock to the chamber without difficulty, and blew it with equal ease. When he had pumped out the access chamber he unshipped his weapon and undogged the entry portal. There was silence in the chamber. Jared consulted the instrument on his wrist and turned to his right, feeling along the solid metal wall. Suddenly, it slipped back, and he was looking into a control room floor-to-ceiling with dials and circuit indicators. The woman had her back to him.

"It can't do what my machine can do," Jared said.

The woman turned suddenly, dropping a group of thin metal strips on a ring.

"You dropped your phasers."

The woman was lovelier than the dossier photo-block Jared had studied. Lovelier, but not prettier. Just lovelier, in a way no facsimile could capture. Hers was a face that had been pretty in youth, but as she had grown older the prettiness had fought a battle with the accumulation of wisdom, the encroachment of character. Merely pretty had lost. Now she was lovelier.

"Who are you...how did you...?"

"The source that let you know I was on Khaine is the same source that told me where your control chamber was to be found." He added after a moment, "I've always felt espionage was a two-edged sword. It usually cuts both ways at the same time. Jeopardy is the operable word, I believe."

She went for a button on a wall. He caught her before she had reached it. She spun him around as he grabbed her arm. He felt her apply the leverage and tried to check himself, but she used his inertia against him and he went up against the wall, and rebounded.

She went for the button again.

He fired and the beam sizzled past her, blowing the button, the circuit, and half the wall out.

The concussion pitched her sidewise and she struck her neck on the edge of a components cabinet. Her eyes rolled up and she fell to the deck.

Jared rose slowly, and went to her.

She was only unconscious.

He snapped a breather on her, hoisted her over his shoulder and left the control chamber.

Rising up through the river, he could not tell if she had stopped breathing. It was not till he had disassembled them, beamed them,

and reassembled them in the observation center of the *Tempest* that he called in the surgeon and was told she would be all right.

They were three days out from Khaine, heading for the moon, when she came up from under the sedatives.

She looked around, instantly grasped where she was, and tried to escape. Jared had her put under again. It would not do to have the High Irina of Khaine die in the airless, colorless spaces of not-space.

Gill was waiting. He looked worried. It was not an expression a human would hold if he were worried, but Gill was a Mexla and Jared knew his moods. He was worried.

“What if she won’t cooperate?”

“I don’t expect her to want to.”

Gill sank and rose on his legs. “Then how the hell—”

“No, not a brainscan; and not drugs. I’ve got to make her want to do it.”

“How the hell—”

“You said that: if you haven’t something constructive, pass off and let me get on with it.”

“Jared, my God, what if...what if...” He could not even frame the thought. It was much too dangerous, much too horrible a thought.

Jared touched the alien gently. “Gill, we’ve come this far. If we’re wrong now, if all of your ‘what ifs’ are so...if somewhere along the way it went bad and we never knew it...then we are what they say we are. If we’ve done it right, then it’ll work out all right.”

Gill bobbed in a resigned manner. “You going to see the machine now?”

Jared nodded. “Is it programmed?”

Gill walked him to the dropshaft. “Up to the top.”

Jared touched him again, gently ruffling his fur. “Be at peace, old friend.” Then said, “No way back now.”

He dropped down through the center of the moon, till he came to the force-locks that separated men from the machine. He unscrambled them, with the only unit that worked—a unit phased in with his brain wave patterns.

The great port opened, and Jared passed in to speak to the machine. It had been many years since he had been summoned down for a consultation.

Now he stood before it, as it rose up out of sight in the gut of the moon. He stood before the metal brain he had caused to be built, to serve him as he killed worlds for profit.

“Hello, Jared,” the machine said.

“It’s been a long time,” Jared answered. He went to the formfit chair the machine kept for him. He sat down and oddly, for the first

time in years, he was totally relaxed. Talking to the machine was exactly like talking to Gill, for the machine had selected the voice-prints of the little alien as his own. The gentle warmth of Gill's tones came from the air around Jared, but it was the voice of the machine, faintly oiled and cool in the caverns.

"Did you bring the High?"

"Yes, I brought her. You're certain it was a necessity for the invasion?"

"Have I ever been wrong?"

Jared chuckled softly. "If you have, I've no way of checking you."

The machine chattered to itself as though considering. "Is it that you think perhaps you've given too much power to a machine, mine creator?"

"It isn't seemly for a machine to mock its master."

"Sorry. Only asking."

"No, it's not that I think you have too much power, it's that I'm afraid if you blow a circuit somewhere, and reroute buggy, we may all wind up saying, 'Yes, massa' to the robots."

"I have no desire to rule men. I am content."

Jared let it lie. The machine could not lie, it could not obfuscate. But it might program itself for a specious truth.

"You're worried about the invasion of Khaine," the machine pinpointed Jared's problem.

"You haven't told me much this time."

"There are reasons. You set me only one chore, Jared. I am directed to the fulfillment of that chore, I have to do what is necessary. Till now we have been in the first phase of the program. Now we are about to enter the second, the most difficult phase. There was only one weak link."

"And that was...?"

The machine waited. "You."

Jared's eyes widened. Many things suddenly became clear to him. He sank down in the formfit, his mind a whirling cyclone of disorder.

Finally, he said, "So now we need the High Irina."

The machine answered quickly. "Yes. *We* need her, and *you* need her. Men often become too much like their machines, Jared. Then they blame the machines for dehumanizing them. For fifteen years I have worked on the program with you. And you worked on it alone for seven years before I was built. Twenty-two years, Jared, a large part of any man's life. Larger than most for yours, because the task you've set yourself is destined to kill you. You've become too much like me. Yes, we need the High."

They talked on, for many hours.

Then Jared dropped up to his city, where Gill met him. Jared looked exhausted. He was able to smile at the alien for a moment before he whispered. "Take me home, Gill. I need sleep."

Then he slumped down and the Mexla took him through the tunnels to the town house, where he stripped him and sent him to sleep on the restful jets of warm air.

And then the alien went to his own home.

But he did not sleep.

## V

Gill could not understand it. After the machine had made it an imperative that Jared, himself, personally, run the recon mission to Khaine, and personally capture the High Irina himself, there was no place in the incredibly simple invasion plan for her use.

The machine had only told them that much, at the outset of the commission. *Capture the High Irina*. So Jared had risked his life and had done it. Then Jared had gone down below and had his talk with the machine, and said nothing about it.

But the next day they had had their battle plan, and the High Irina's only place in it was that the machine insisted she be on board the *Tempest* to witness the invasion in all of its phases.

Gill was nervous, worried. It seemed wrong. There *was* something wrong, terribly wrong.

Now, as they watched the final stages of the mop-up, as the client from Bunyan IV chuckled like a madman beside them, Gill checked the force-bonds on the High, and wished they had never accepted the commission.

She had not spoken throughout the campaign. It had been a one-day affair; Khaine was terribly vulnerable. Now it was killed, even as she watched.

Jared had paid no attention to her, but had taken his position before the two hundred screens and supervised the slaughter. She had not spoken when they turned the skyline of Jerusalem glowing red, nor when the city winked out of existence. She had not spoken when they ran the strafing missions with the stukas across the plandar refineries nor when they made a glass-sided crater of the mountain armaments base. She watched silently, and when the Planetary Secure signal came through, she closed her eyes and sank back against her bonds.

The client from Bunyan IV—tall and thin as something out of an Earth legend, with knobs at the joints, a nose sharp as a letter opener, and eyes slitted and green—turned to Jared as the world-assassin said, "That's it, Seventeen. The job is done."

“Fine, just fine,” said the alien, snapping his joints with delight. He had laughed hysterically throughout the operation. Jared despised him.

“One more tiny thing, though,” Seventeen said, palming out a razor-disc. He turned to the High, where she sat force-shackled. “Goodbye, my Irina.”

He cracked back in three sharp stages cocking his arm to spin off the disc. Irina stared at him coldly. She was not frightened.

“No!”

The word cracked as sharply as had Seventeen’s joints. Seventeen swiveled his long head in stages. Jared was staring at him evenly. The wire-thin arm with the razor-disc did not lower.

“I said: no.”

Seventeen laughed with the shrieking high sound of a lunatic. “This is the High Irina, assassin. She is the only one who could lead a counterattack against me. It is that she must die. Now!” He jerked back.

“I haven’t been paid yet, Seventeen.”

“In good time, assassin.”

“Now.”

“First I attend myself to final things first.”

“Don’t make me kill you, Seventeen,” Jared said, behind him. The client from Bunyan IV snapped back in stages, and saw the weapon in Jared’s hand.

“What is this?”

“I want to be paid now. Right now.”

Seventeen tried to keep his eyes on both Gill and Jared at the same time. The fuzzy alien was working his way around the bridge slowly. Seventeen could tell he was being stalked, but he did not know why.

“You never told me what it is that is payment.”

Jared nodded toward the woman.

“No!” The word was Jared’s word, said as loud and with as much imperativeness as the world-killer had said it, a moment before.

Jared moved closer, aiming the weapon and realigning himself so the beam would miss vital instruments behind Seventeen. “She’s mine. That’s my payment. Kill her and I call back my units. In three days we can be at Bunyan IV; what you saw here can be repeated there.”

Seventeen lowered the disc.

“She is yours.”

Jared’s reply was pleasant. “Thank you, Seventeen. Now go take possession.”

The client from Bunyan IV dropped out of sight, and in the screens a few minutes later the shuttle ship dropped out of the *Tempest* in a similar manner. Then Jared spoke to Gill.

“Relay the transfer affirmative. Let them take it now.”

Gill rose on his legs and went to pass ownership of Khaine to the Bunyan IV fleet hanging just outside the detector range of the conquered planet.

Irina watched as the alien ships dropped down through the atmosphere of her planet. Now...she averted her eyes.

Finally, when she looked up, Jared was watching her. “You should have let him kill me,” she said in a low and level voice. “You’ll never have a secure moment while I live.” Jared put away his weapon.

“You’ll talk to a friend of mine,” Jared said.

And he turned away from her.

When they returned to Jared’s moon, she tried to kill him as the force-bonds were removed. It was an abortive effort, and Gill managed to get the sedative-spray into her skull without too much thrashing around.

When she woke, she was in the caverns, in the formfit, in the presence of the machine.

Then the machine proved to her that Jared paid a far higher price for his conquests than did any of his clients. The machine opened channels in her brain that had always been blocked by environment and loyalties and age.

Then she knew who Jared really was, and what he was doing...

“It was a futile, noble idea,” the machine said. “It was doomed from the start; until I was created. Then it stood a chance. Twenty-two years. Now it is a possibility. Order in the known universe. Worlds linked to worlds by mutual respect and mutual ethic. Now it is a possibility. We have conquered each world in a manner to give Jared’s clients possession—but not permanent possession. When the time comes, because of the manner of conquest and because of the stresses we have set up in a master program, all the parts will fall into place. Each invader will fall, but in a way that will link the worlds in reliance upon one another. Cogs in a great galactic machine. Not like their petty Sodalities and Unions, but a great humanistic structure that will serve all men as individuals and all worlds as entities.”

Irina, no longer the High, listened to it all, her mind absorbing the truth of the machine because it had been at last opened to truth.

“Jared’s loneliness is that he knows he must do this job alone, for it is the only way it *can* be done. And if he fails, or if he dies in the process, his name will live on in the memory of the million worlds as the greatest villain the universe ever spawned. It is now an additional part of my task to keep him sane, keep him honest, keep him alive, so the job can be done. Each payment he took was an aid to getting the master program implemented. Even you. Most importantly, you.”



Irina rose.

The machine added only, "Not just as his woman, if you decide to stay. But to learn all he knows, to take over for him if he dies. And if there is time, to give him children who can do the job after him. This is one secret that must be shared with silence. Only the alien Gill knows, and he cannot help Jared."

She left the chamber, dropped up and was met by the fuzzy Mexla. "Will you stay?" he asked her.

"I'll stay," she said, and then paused, as if she wanted to say something else. "Not now," she finally said. "Another time, when I can say what I have to say."

Gill took her to him, where he slept. And he left her there, watching him as he turned in his sleep, thinking awful thoughts of death and futility. And she looked at him, not loving him, perhaps never loving him, not really liking him, for she could never like the man who had showed her the sights in the two hundred screens, but willing to stay; wondering in the silent words she had not been able to speak to Gill:

*Why should this god be any more successful than all the other gods who have failed?*

But across the empty reaches of space there was no answer, only silent attention from the million worlds that waited to become parts of a master universe, or to curse till eternity the names of those who killed planets for profit.

—New York, 1968

## SHATTERED LIKE A GLASS GOBLIN

So it was there, eight months later, that Rudy found her; in that huge and ugly house off Western Avenue in Los Angeles; living with them, *all* of them; not just Jonah, but all of them.

It was November in Los Angeles, near sundown, and unaccountably chill even for the fall in that place always near the sun. He came down the sidewalk and stopped in front of the place. It was gothic hideous, with the grass half-cut and the rusted lawnmower sitting in the middle of an unfinished swath. Grass cut as if a placating gesture to the outraged tenants of the two lanai apartment houses that loomed over the squat structure on either side. (Yet how strange...the apartment buildings were taller, the old house hunched down between them, but it seemed to dominate *them*. How odd.)

Cardboard covered the upstairs windows.

A baby carriage was overturned on the front walk.

The front door was ornately carved.

Darkness seemed to breathe heavily.

Rudy shifted the duffel bag slightly on his shoulder. He was afraid of the house. He was breathing more heavily as he stood there, and a panic he could never have described tightened the fat muscles on either side of his shoulderblades. He looked up into the corners of the darkening sky, seeking a way out, but he could only go forward. Kristina was in there.

Another girl answered the door.

She looked at him without speaking, her long blonde hair half-obscuring her face; peering out from inside the veil of Clairon and dirt.

When he asked a second time for Kris, she wet her lips in the corners, and a tic made her cheek jump. Rudy set down the duffel bag with a whump. "Kris, please," he said urgently.

The blonde girl turned away and walked back into the dim hallways of the terrible old house. Rudy stood in the open doorway, and suddenly, as if the blonde girl had been a barrier to it, and her departure had released it, he was assaulted, like a smack in the face, by a wall of pungent scent. It was marijuana.

He reflexively inhaled, and his head reeled. He took a step back, into the last inches of sunlight coming over the lanai apartment building, and then it was gone, and he was still buzzing, and moved

forward, dragging the duffel bag behind him.

He did not remember closing the front door, but when he looked, some time later, it was closed behind him.

He found Kris on the third floor, lying against the wall of a dark closet, her left hand stroking a faded pink rag rabbit, her right hand at her mouth, the little finger crooked, the thumb-ring roach holder half-obscured as she sucked up the last wonders of the joint. The closet held an infinitude of odors—dirty sweat socks as pungent as stew, fleece jackets on which the rain had dried to mildew, a mop gracious with its scent of old dust hardened to dirt, the overriding weed smell of what she had been at for no one knew how long—and it held her. As pretty as pretty could be.

“Kris?”

Slowly, her head came up, and she saw him. Much later, she tracked and focused and she began to cry. “Go away.”

In the limpid silences of the whispering house, back and above him in the darkness, Rudy heard the sudden sound of leather wings beating furiously for a second, then nothing.

Rudy crouched down beside her, his heart grown twice its size in his chest. He wanted so desperately to reach her, to talk to her. “Kris...please...” She turned her head away, and with the hand that had been stroking the rabbit she slapped at him awkwardly, missing him.

For an instant, Rudy could have sworn he heard the sound of someone counting heavy gold pieces, somewhere off to his right, down a passageway of the third floor. But when he half-turned, and looked out through the closet door, and tried to focus his hearing on it, there was no sound to home in on.

Kris was trying to crawl back farther into the closet. She was trying to smile.

He turned back; on hands and knees he moved into the closet after her.

“The rabbit,” she said, languorously. “You’re crushing the rabbit.” He looked down, his right knee was lying on the soft matted-fur head of the pink rabbit. He pulled it out from under his knee and threw it into a corner of the closet. She looked at him with disgust. “You haven’t changed, Rudy. Go away.”

“I’m outta the army, Kris,” Rudy said gently. “They let me out on a medical. I want you to come back, Kris, please.”

She would not listen, but pulled herself away from him, deep into the closet, and closed her eyes. He moved his lips several times, as though trying to recall words he had already spoken, but there was no sound, and he lit a cigarette, and sat in the open doorway of the

closet, smoking and waiting for her to come back to him. He had waited eight months for her to come back to him, since he had been inducted and she had written him telling him, *Rudy, I'm going to live with Jonah at The Hill.*

There was the sound of something very tiny, lurking in the infinitely black shadow where the top step of the stairs from the second floor met the landing. It giggled in a glass harpsichord trilling. Rudy knew it was giggling at *him*, but he could discern no movement from that comer.

Kris opened her eyes and stared at him with distaste. "Why did you come here?"

"Because we're gonna be married."

"Get out of here."

"I love you, Kris. Please."

She kicked out at him. It didn't hurt, but it was meant to. He backed out of the closet slowly.

Jonah was down in the living room. The blonde girl who had answered the door was trying to get his pants off him. He kept shaking his head no, and trying to fend her off with a weak-wristed hand. The record player under the brick-and-board bookshelves was playing Simon & Garfunkel, "The Big Bright Green Pleasure Machine."

"Melting," Jonah said gently. "Melting," and he pointed toward the big, foggy mirror over the fireplace mantel. The fireplace was crammed with unburned wax milk cartons, candy bar wrappers, newspapers from the underground press, and kitty litter. The mirror was dim and chill. "*Melting*," Jonah yelled suddenly, covering his eyes.

"Oh shit!" the blonde girl said, and threw him down, giving up at last. She came toward Rudy.

"What's wrong with him?" Rudy asked.

"He's freaking out again. Christ, what a drag he can be."

"Yeah, but what's *happening* to him?"

She shrugged. "He sees his face melting; that's what he says."

"Is he on marijuana?"

The blonde girl looked at him with sudden distrust. "Mari—? Hey, who *are* you?"

"I'm a friend of Kris's."

The blonde girl assayed him for a moment more, then by the way her shoulders dropped and her posture relaxed, she accepted him. "I thought you might've just walked in, you know, maybe the Laws. You know?"

There was a Middle Earth poster on the wall behind her, with its brightness faded in a long straight swath where the sun caught it every morning. He looked around uneasily. He didn't know what to

do.

"I was supposed to marry Kris. Eight months ago," he said.

"You want to fuck?" asked the blonde girl. "When Jonah trips he turns off. I been drinking Coca-Cola all morning and all day, and I'm really horny."

Another record dropped onto the turntable and Stevie Wonder blew hard into his harmonica and started singing, "I Was Born To Love Her."

"I was engaged to Kris," Rudy said, feeling sad. "We was going to be married when I got out of basic. But she decided to come over here with Jonah, and I didn't want to push her. So I waited eight months, but I'm out of the army now."

"Well, *do* you or *don't* you?"

Under the dining room table. She put a satin pillow under her. It said: *Souvenir of Niagara Folk, New York.*

When he went back into the living room, Jonah was sitting up on the sofa, reading Hesse's *MAGISTER LUDI*.

"Jonah?" Rudy said. Jonah looked up. It took him a while to recognize Rudy.

When he did, he patted the sofa beside him, and Rudy came and sat down.

"Hey, Rudy, where y'been?"

"I've been in the army."

"Wow."

"Yeah, it was awful."

"You out now? I mean for good?"

Rudy nodded. "Uh-huh. Medical."

"Hey, that's good."

They sat quietly for a while. Jonah started to nod, and then said to himself, "You're not very tired."

Rudy said, "Jonah, hey listen, what's the story with Kris? You know, we was supposed to get married about eight months ago."

"She's around someplace," Jonah answered.

Out of the kitchen, through the dining room where the blonde girl lay sleeping under the table, came the sound of something wild, tearing at meat. It went on for a long time, but Rudy was looking out the front window, the big bay window. There was a man in a dark gray suit standing talking to two policemen on the sidewalk at the edge of the front walk leading up to the front door. He was pointing at the big, old house.

"Jonah, can Kris come away now?"

Jonah looked angry. "Hey, listen, man, nobody's *keeping* her here. She's been grooving with all of us and she likes it. Go ask her. Christ,

don't bug me!"

The two cops were walking up to the front door.

Rudy got up and went to answer the doorbell.

They smiled at him when they saw his uniform.

"May I help you?" Rudy asked them.

The first cop said, "Do you live here?"

"Yes," said Rudy. "My name is Rudolph Boekel. May I help you?"

"We'd like to come inside and talk to you."

"Do you have a search warrant?"

"We don't want to search, we only want to talk to you. Are you in the army?"

"Just discharged. I came home to see my family."

"Can we come in?"

"No, sir."

The second cop looked troubled. "Is this the place they call 'The Hill'?"

"Who?" Rudy asked, looking perplexed.

"Well, the neighbors said this was 'The Hill' and there were some pretty wild parties going on here."

"Do you hear any partying?"

The cops looked at each other. Rudy added, "It's always very quiet here. My mother is dying of cancer of the stomach."

They let Rudy move in, because he was able to talk to people who came to the door from the outside. Aside from Rudy, who went out to get food, and the weekly trips to the unemployment line, no one left The Hill. It was usually very quiet.

Except sometimes there was a sound of growling in the back hall leading up to what had been a maid's room; and the splashing from the basement, the sound of wet things on bricks.

It was a self-contained little universe, bordered on the north by acid and mescaline, on the south by pot and peyote, on the east by speed and redballs, on the west by downers and amphetamines. There were eleven people living in The Hill. Eleven, and Rudy.

He walked through the halls, and sometimes found Kris, who would not talk to him, save once, when she asked him if he'd ever been heavy behind *anything* except love. He didn't know what to answer her, so he only said, "Please," and she called him a square and walked off toward the stairway leading to the dormered attic.

Rudy had heard squeaking from the attic. It had sounded to him like the shrieking of mice being torn to pieces. There were cats in the house.

He did not know why he was there, except that he didn't understand why *she* wanted to stay. His head always buzzed and he sometimes felt that if he just said the right thing, the right way, Kris

would come away with him. He began to dislike the light. It hurt his eyes.

No one talked to anyone else very much. There was always a struggle to keep high, to keep the *group high* as elevated as possible. In that way they cared for each other.

And Rudy became their one link with the outside. He had written to someone—his parents, a friend, a bank, someone—and now there was money coming in. Not much, but enough to keep the food stocked, and the rent paid. But he insisted Kris be nice to him.

They all made her be nice to him, and she slept with him in the little room on the second floor where Rudy had put his newspapers and his duffel bag. He lay there most of the day, when he was not out on errands for The Hill, and he read the smaller items about train wrecks and molestations in the suburbs. And Kris came to him and they made love of a sort.

One night she convinced him he should “make it, heavy behind acid” and he swallowed fifteen hundred mikes cut with Methedrine, in two big gel caps, and she was stretched out like taffy for six miles. He was a fine copper wire charged with electricity, and he pierced her flesh. She wriggled with the current that flowed through him, and became softer yet. He sank down through the softness, and carefully observed the intricate wood-grain effect her teardrops made as they rose in the mist around him. He was downdrifting slowly, turning and turning, held by a whisper of blue that came out of his body like a spiderweb. The sound of her breathing in the moist crystal pillared cavity that went down and down was the sound of the very walls themselves, and when he touched them with his warm metal fingertips she drew in breath heavily, forcing the air up around him as he sank down, twisting slowly in a veil of musky looseness.

There was an insistent pulsing growing somewhere below him, and he was afraid of it as he descended, the high-pitched whining of something threatening to shatter. He felt panic. Panic gripped him, flailed at him, his throat constricted, he tried to grasp the veil and it tore away in his hands; then he was falling, faster now, much faster, and *afraid!*

Violet explosions all around him and the shrieking of something that wanted him, that was seeking him, pulsing deeply in the throat of an animal he could not name, and he heard her shouting, heard her wail and pitch beneath him and a terrible crushing feeling in him...

And then there was silence.

That lasted for a moment.

And then there was soft music that demanded nothing but inattention. So they lay there, fitted together, in the heat of the tiny

room, and they slept for some hours.

After that, Rudy seldom went out into the light. He did the shopping at night, wearing shades. He emptied the garbage at night, and he swept down the front walk, and did the front lawn with scissors because the lawnmower would have annoyed the residents of the lanai apartments (who no longer complained, because there was seldom a sound from The Hill).

He began to realize he had not seen some of the eleven young people who lived in The Hill for a long time. But the sounds from above and below and around him in the house grew more frequent.

Rudy's clothes were too large for him now. He wore only underpants. His hands and feet hurt. The knuckles of his fingers were larger, from cracking them, and they were always an angry crimson.

His head always buzzed. The thin perpetual odor of pot had saturated into the wood walls and the rafters. He had an itch on the outside of his ears he could not quell. He read newspapers all the time, old newspapers whose items were embedded in his memory. He remembered a job he had once held as a garage mechanic, but that seemed a very long time ago. When they cut off the electricity in The Hill, it didn't bother Rudy, because he preferred the dark. But he went to tell the eleven.

He could not find them.

They were all gone. Even Kris, who should have been there somewhere.

He heard the moist sounds from the basement and went down with fur and silence into the darkness. The basement had been flooded. One of the eleven was there. His name was Teddy. He was attached to the slime-coated upper wall of the basement, hanging close to the stone, pulsing softly and giving off a thin purple light, purple as a bruise. He dropped a rubbery arm into the water, and let it hang there, moving idly with the tideless tide. Then something came near it, and he made a sharp movement, and brought the thing up still writhing in his rubbery grip, and inched it along the wall to a dark, moist spot on his upper surface, near the veins that covered its length, and pushed the thing at the dark-blood spot, where it shrieked with a terrible sound, and went in and there was a sucking noise, then a swallowing sound.

Rudy went back upstairs. On the first floor he found the one who was the blonde girl, whose name was Adrianne. She lay out thin and white as a tablecloth on the dining room table as three of the others he had not seen in a very long while put their teeth into her, and through their hollow sharp teeth they drank up the yellow fluid from the bloated pus-pockets that had been her breasts and her buttocks.



Their faces were very white and their eyes were like soot-smudges.

Climbing to the second floor, Rudy was almost knocked down by the passage of something that had been Victor, flying on heavily ribbed leather wings. It carried a cat in its jaws.

He saw the thing on the stairs that sounded as though it was counting heavy gold pieces. It was not counting heavy gold pieces. Rudy could not look at it; it made him feel sick.

He found Kris in the attic, in a corner breaking the skull and sucking out the moist brains of a thing that giggled like a harpsichord.

“Kris, we have to go away,” he told her. She reached out and touched him, snapping her long, pointed, dirty fingernails against him. He rang like crystal.

In the rafters of the attic Jonah crouched, gargoyle and sleeping. There was a green stain on his jaws, and something stringy in his claws.

“Kris, please,” he said urgently.

His head buzzed.

His ears itched.

Kris sucked out the last of the mellow good things in the skull of the silent little creature, and scraped idly at the flaccid body with hairy hands. She settled back on her haunches, and her long, hairy muzzle came up.

Rudy scuttled away.

He ran loping, his knuckles brushing the attic floor as he scampered for safety. Behind him, Kris was growling. He got down to the second floor and then to the first, and tried to climb up on the Morris chair to the mantel, so he could see himself in the mirror, by the light of the moon, through the fly-blown window. But Naomi was on the window, lapping up the flies with her tongue.

He climbed with desperation, wanting to see himself. And when he stood before the mirror, he saw that he was transparent, that there was nothing inside him, that his ears had grown pointed and had hair on their tips; his eyes were as huge as a tarsier's and the reflected light hurt him.

Then he heard the growling behind and below him.

The little glass goblin turned, and the werewolf rose up on its hind legs and touched him till he rang like fine crystal.

And the werewolf said with very little concern, “Have you ever grooved heavy behind *anything* except love?”

“Please!” the little glass goblin begged, just as the great hairy paw slapped him into a million coruscating rainbow fragments all expanding consciously into the tight little enclosed universe that was The Hill, all buzzing highly contacted and tingling off into a darkness

that began to seep out through the silent wooden walls...

—*Milford, Pike County, Pennsylvania, 1967*

## A BOY AND HIS DOG

*N.B. Though the story that follows has been reprinted widely, has won a number of literary awards, and has been made into a motion picture you may have seen, it was never intended to stand alone. It is the third section of a novel-in-progress whose overall title is BLOOD'S A ROVER. And though considerable time has passed since this novella first appeared in print, the full story of Blood and Vic (and one important other who does not appear in this section) has yet to be told. But I'm on the job.*

—Harlan Ellison

### I

I was out with Blood, my dog. It was his week for annoying me; he kept calling me Albert. He thought that was pretty damned funny. Payson Terhune: ha ha.

I'd caught a couple of water rats for him, the big green and ocher ones, and someone's manicured poodle, lost off a leash in one of the downunders.

He'd eaten pretty good, but he was cranky. "Come on, son of a bitch," I demanded, "find me a piece of ass."

Blood just chuckled, deep in his dog-throat. "You're funny when you get horny," he said.

Maybe funny enough to kick him upside his sphincter asshole, that refugee from a dingo-heap.

"Find! I ain't kidding!"

"For shame, Albert. After all I've taught you. Not 'I *ain't* kidding.' I'm *not* kidding."

He knew I'd reached the edge of my patience. Sullenly, he started casting. He sat down on the crumbled remains of the curb, and his eyelids flickered and closed, and his hairy body tensed. After a while he settled down on his front paws, and scraped them forward till he was lying flat, his shaggy head on the outstretched paws. The tenseness left him and he began trembling, almost the way he trembled just preparatory to scratching a flea. It went on that way for almost a quarter of an hour, and finally he rolled over and lay on his back, his naked belly toward the night sky, his front paws folded mantislike, his hind legs extended and open. "I'm sorry," he said.

"There's nothing."

I could have gotten mad and booted him, but I knew he had tried. I wasn't happy about it, I really wanted to get laid, but what could I do? "Okay," I said, with resignation, "forget it."

He kicked himself onto his side and quickly got up.

"What do you want to do?" he asked.

"Not much we *can* do, is there?" I was more than a little sarcastic. He sat down again, at my feet, insolently humble.

I leaned against the melted stub of a lamppost, and thought about girls. It was painful. "We can always go to a show," I said. Blood looked around the street, at the pools of shadow lying in the weed-overgrown craters, and didn't say anything. The whelp was waiting for me to say okay, let's go. He liked movies as much as I did.

"Okay, let's go."

He got up and followed me, his tongue hanging, panting with happiness. Go ahead and laugh, you eggsucker. No popcorn for *you*!

Our Gang was a roverpak that had never been able to cut it simply foraging, so they'd opted for comfort and gone a smart way to getting it. They were movie-oriented kids, and they'd taken over the turf where the Metropole Theater was located. No one tried to bust their turf, because we all needed the movies, and as long as Our Gang had access to films, and did a better job of keeping the films going, they provided a service, even for solos like me and Blood. *Especially* for solos like us.

They made me check my .45 and the Browning .22 long at the door. There was a little alcove right beside the ticket booth. I bought my tickets first; it cost me a can of Oscar Mayer Philadelphia Scrapple for me, and a tin of sardines for Blood. Then the Our Gang guards with the bren guns motioned me over to the alcove and I checked my heat. I saw water leaking from a broken pipe in the ceiling and I told the checker, a kid with big leathery warts all over his face and lips, to move my weapons where it was dry. He ignored me. "Hey you! Motherfuckin', toad, move my stuff over the other side...it goes to rust fast...an' it picks up any spots, man, I'll break your bones!"

He started to give me jaw about it, looked at the guards with the brens, knew if they tossed me out I'd lose my price of admission whether I went in or not, but they weren't looking for any action, probably understrength, and gave him the nod to let it pass, to do what I said. So the toad moved my Browning to the other end of the gun rack, and pegged my .45 under it.

Blood and me went into the theater.

"I want popcorn."

"Forget it."

"Come on, Albert. Buy me popcorn."

"I'm tapped out. You can live without popcorn."

"You're just being a shit."

I shrugged: sue me.

We went in. The place was jammed. I was glad the guards hadn't tried to take anything but guns. My spike and knife felt reassuring, lying-up in their oiled sheaths at the back of my neck. Blood found two together, and we moved into the row, stepping on feet. Someone cursed and I ignored him. A Doberman growled. Blood's fur stirred, but he let it pass. There was always *some* hardcase on the muscle, even on neutral ground like the Metropole.

(I heard once about a get-it-on they'd had at the old Loew's Granada, on the South Side. Wound up with ten or twelve rovers and their mutts dead, the theater burned down and a couple of good Cagney films lost in the fire. After that was when the roverpaks had got up the agreement that movie houses were sanctuaries. It was better now, but there was always somebody too messed in the mind to come soft.)

It was a triple feature. *Raw Deal* with Dennis O'Keefe, Claire Trevor, Raymond Burr and Marsha Hunt was the oldest of the three. It'd been made in 1948, eighty-six years ago; god only knows how the damn thing'd hung together all that time; it slipped sprockets and they had to stop the movie all the time to re-thread it. But it was a good movie. About this solo who'd been japped by his roverpak and was out to get revenge. Gangsters, mobs, a lot of punching and fighting. Real good.

The middle flick was a thing made during the Third War, in '92, twenty-seven years before I was even born, thing called *Smell of a Chink*. It was mostly gut-spilling and some nice hand-to-hand. Beautiful scene of skirmisher greyhounds equipped with napalm throwers, jellyburning a Chink town. Blood dug it, even though we'd seen this flick before. He had some kind of phony shuck going that these were ancestors of his, and *he* knew and *I* knew, he was making it up.

"Wanna burn a baby, hero?" I whispered to him. He got the barb and just shifted in his seat, didn't say a thing, kept looking pleased as the dogs worked their way through the town. I was bored stiff.

I was waiting for the main feature.

Finally it came on. It was a beauty, a beaver flick made in the late 1970s. It was called *Big Black Leather Splits*. Started right out very good. These two blondes in black leather corsets and boots laced all

the way up to their crotches, with whips and masks, got this skinny guy down and one of the chicks sat on his face while the other one went down on him. It got really hairy after that.

All around me there were solos playing with themselves. I was about to jog it a little myself when Blood leaned across and said, real soft, the way he does when he's onto something unusually smelly, "There's a chick in here."

"You're nuts," I said.

"I tell you I smell her. She's in here, man."

Without being conspicuous, I looked around. Almost every seat in the theater was taken with solos or their dogs. If a chick had slipped in there'd have been a riot. She'd have been ripped to pieces before any single guy could have gotten into her. "Where?" I asked, softly. All around me, the solos were beating-off, moaning as the blondes took off their masks and one of them worked the skinny guy with a big wooden ram strapped around her hips.

"Give me a minute," Blood said. He was really concentrating. His body was tense as a wire. His eyes were closed, his muzzle quivering. I let him work.

It was possible. Just maybe possible. I knew that they made really dumb flicks in the downunders, the kind of crap they'd made back in the 1930s and '40s, real clean stuff with even married people sleeping in twin beds. Myrna Loy and George Brent kind of flicks. And I knew that once in a while a chick from one of the really strict middle-class downunders would cumup, to see what a hairy flick was like. I'd heard about it, but it'd never happened in any theater I'd ever been in.

And the chances of it happening in the Metropole, particularly, were slim. There was a lot of twisty trade came to the Metropole. Now, understand, I'm not specially prejudiced against guys corning one another...hell, I can understand it. There just aren't enough chicks anywhere. But I can't cut the jockey-and-boxer scene because it gets some weak little boxer hanging on you, getting jealous, you have to hunt for him and all he thinks he has to do is bare his ass to get all the work done for him. It's as bad as having a chick dragging along behind. Made for a lot of bad blood and fights in the bigger roverpaks, too. So I just never swung that way. Well, not *never*, but not for a long time.

So with all the twisties in the Metropole, I didn't think a chick would chance it. Be a toss-up who'd tear her apart first: the boxers or the straights.

And if she was here, why couldn't any of the other dogs smell her...?

"Third row in front of us," Blood said. "Aisle seat. Dressed like a solo."

"How's come *you* can whiff her and no other dog's caught her?"  
"You forget who I am, Albert."

"I didn't forget, I just don't believe it."

Actually, bottom-line, I guess I *did* believe it. When you'd been as dumb as I'd been and a dog like Blood'd taught me so much, a guy came to believe *everything* he said. You don't argue with your teacher.

Not when he'd taught you how to read and write and add and subtract and everything else they used to know that meant you were smart (but doesn't mean much of anything now, except it's good to know it, I guess).

(The reading's a pretty good thing. It comes in handy when you can find some canned goods someplace, like in a bombed-out supermarket; makes it easier to pick out stuff you like when the pictures are gone off the labels. Couple of times the reading stopped me from taking canned beets. Shit, I *hate* beets!)

So I guess I *did* believe why he could whiff a maybe chick in there, and no other mutt could. He'd told me all about *that* a million times. It was his favorite story. History he called it. Christ, I'm not *that* dumb! I knew what history was. That was all the stuff that happened before now.

But I liked hearing history straight from Blood, instead of him making me read one of those crummy books he was always dragging in. And *that* particular history was all about him, so he laid it on me over and over, till I knew it by heart...no, the word was *rote*. Not *wrote*, like writing, that was something else. I knew it by rote, means you got it word-for-word.

And when a mutt teaches you everything you know, and he tells you something rote, I guess finally you *do* believe it. Except I'd never let that leg-lifter know it.

## II

What he'd told me rote was:

Over sixty-five years ago, in Los Angeles, before the Third War even got going completely, there was a man named Buesing who lived in Cerritos. He raised dogs as watchmen and sentries and attackers. Dobermans, Danes, schnauzers and Japanese akitas. He had one four-year-old German shepherd bitch named Ginger. She worked for the Los Angeles Police Department's narcotics division. She could smell out marijuana. No matter how well it was hidden. They ran a test on her: there were 25,000 boxes in an auto parts warehouse. Five of them had been planted with marijuana sealed in cellophane, wrapped in tin foil and heavy brown paper, and finally hidden in three separate sealed cartons. Within seven minutes Ginger found all five packages.

At the same time that Ginger was working, ninety-two miles farther north, in Santa Barbara, cetologists had drawn and amplified dolphin spinal fluid and injected it into Chacma baboons and dogs. Altering surgery and grafting had been done. The first successful product of this cetacean experimentation had been a two-year-old male Puli named Ahbhu, who had communicated sense-impressions telepathically. Cross-breeding and continued experimentation had produced the first skirmisher dogs, just in time for the Third War. Telepathic over short distances, easily trained, able to track gasoline or troops or poison gas or radiation when linked with their human controllers, they had become the shock commandos of a new kind of war. The selective traits had bred true. Dobermans, greyhounds, akitas, pulis and schnauzers had become steadily more telepathic.

Ginger and Ahbhu had been Blood's ancestors.

He had told me so, a thousand times. Had told me the story just that way, in just those words, a thousand times, as it had been told to him. I'd never believed him till now.

Maybe the little bastard *was* special.

I checked out the solo scrunched down in the aisle seat three rows ahead of me. I couldn't tell a damned thing. The solo had his (her?) cap pulled way down, fleece jacket pulled way up.

"Are you sure?"

"As sure as I can be. It's a girl."

"If it is, she's playing with herself just like a guy."

Blood snickered. "Surprise," he said sarcastically.

The mystery solo sat through *Raw Deal* again. It made sense, if that was a girl. Most of the solos and all of the members of roverpaks left after the beaver flick. The theater didn't fill up much more, it gave the streets time to empty, he/she could make his/her way back to wherever he/she had come from. I sat through *Raw Deal* again myself. Blood went to sleep.

When the mystery solo got up, I gave him/her time to get weapons if any'd been checked, and started away. Then I pulled Blood's big shaggy ear and said, "Let's do it." He slouched after me, up the aisle.

I got my guns and checked the street. Empty.

"Okay, nose," I said, "where'd he go?"

"Her. To the right."

I started off, loading the Browning from my bandolier. I still didn't see anyone moving among the bombed-out shells of the buildings. This section of the city was crummy, really bad shape. But then, with Our Gang running the Metropole, they didn't have to repair anything else to get their livelihood. It was ironic; the Dragons had to keep an entire power plant going to get tribute from the other roverpaks; Ted's



Bunch had to mind the reservoir; the Bastinados worked like fieldhands in the marijuana gardens; the Barbados Blacks lost a couple of dozen members every year cleaning out the radiation pits all over the city; and Our Gang only had to run that movie house.

Whoever their leader had been, however many years ago it had been that the roverpaks had started forming out of foraging solos, I had to give it to him: he'd been a flinty sharp mother. He knew what services to deal in.

"She turned off here," Blood said.

I followed him as he began loping, toward the edge of the city and the bluish-green radiation that still flickered from the hills. I knew he was right, then. The only things out here were screamers and the access dropshaft to the downunder. It was a girl, all right.

The cheeks of my ass tightened as I thought about it. I was going to get laid. It had been almost a month, since Blood had whiffed that solo chick in the basement of the Market Basket. She'd been filthy, and I'd gotten the crabs from her, but she'd been a woman, all right, and once I'd tied her down and clubbed her a couple of times she'd been pretty good. She'd liked it, too, even if she did spit on me and tell me she'd kill me if she ever got loose. I left her tied up, just to be sure. She wasn't there when I went back to look, week before last.

"Watch out," Blood said, dodging around a crater almost invisible against the surrounding shadows. Something stirred in the crater.

Trekking across the nomansland I realized why it was that all but a handful of solos or members of roverpaks were guys. The War had killed off most of the girls, and that was the way it always was in wars...at least that's what Blood told me. The things getting born were seldom male *or* female, and had to be smashed against a wall as soon as they were pulled out of the mother.

The few chicks who hadn't gone downunder with the middle-classers were hard, solitary bitches like the one in the Market Basket; tough and stringy and just as likely to cut off your meat with a razor blade once they let you get in. Scuffling for a piece of ass had gotten harder and harder, the older I'd gotten.

But every once in a while a chick got tired of being roverpak property, or a raid was got-up by five or six roverpaks and some unsuspecting downunder was taken, or—like this time, yeah—some middle-class chick from a downunder got hot pants to find out what a beaver flick looked like, and cumup.

I was going to get laid. Oh boy, I couldn't wait!

### III

Out here it was nothing but empty corpses of blasted buildings.

One entire block had been stomped flat, like a steel press had come down from Heaven and given one solid wham! and everything was powder under it. The chick was scared and skittish, I could see that. She moved erratically, looking back over her shoulder and to either side. She knew she was in dangerous country. Man, if she'd only known *how* dangerous.

There was one building standing all alone at the end of the smashflat block, like it had been missed and chance let it stay. She ducked inside and a minute later I saw a bobbing light. Flashlight? Maybe.

Blood and I crossed the street and came up into the blackness surrounding the building. It was what was left of a YMCA.

That meant "Young Men's Christian Association." Blood had taught me to read.

So what the hell was a young men's Christian association? Sometimes being able to read makes more questions than if you were stupid.

I didn't want her getting out; inside there was as good a place to screw her as any, so I put Blood on guard right beside the steps leading up into the shell, and I went around the back. All the doors and windows had been blown out, of course. It wasn't no big trick getting in. I pulled myself up to the ledge of a window, and dropped down inside. Dark inside. No noise, except the sound of her, moving around on the other side of the old YMCA. I didn't know if she was heeled or not, and I wasn't about to take any chances. I bowslung the Browning and took out the .45 automatic. I didn't have to snap back the action—there was always a slug in the chamber.

I started moving carefully through the room. It was a locker room of some kind. There was glass and debris all over the floor, and one entire row of metal lockers had the paint blistered off their surfaces; the flash blast had caught them through the windows, a lot of years ago. My sneakers didn't make a sound coming through the room.

The door was hanging on one hinge, and I stepped over—through the inverted triangle. I was in the swimming pool area. The big pool was empty, with tiles buckled down at the shallow end. It stunk bad in there; no wonder, there were dead guys, or what was left of them, along one wall. Some lousy cleaner-up had stacked them, but hadn't buried them. I pulled my bandanna up around my nose and mouth and kept moving.

Out the other side of the pool place, and through a little passage with popped light bulbs in the ceiling. I didn't have any trouble seeing. There was moonlight coming through busted windows and a chunk was out of the ceiling. I could hear her real plain now, just on

the other side of the door at the end of the passage. I hung close to the wall, and stepped down to the door. It was open a crack, but blocked by a fall of lath and plaster from the wall. It would make noise when I went to pull it open, that was for certain. I had to wait for the right moment.

Flattened against the wall, I checked out what she was doing in there. It was a gymnasium, big one, with climbing ropes hanging down from the ceiling. She had a squat, square, eight-cell flashlight sitting up on the croup of a vaulting horse. There were parallel bars and a horizontal bar about eight feet high, the tempered steel all rusty now. There were swinging rings and a trampoline and a big wooden balancing beam. Over to one side there were wall-bars and balancing benches, horizontal and oblique ladders, and a couple of stacks of vaulting boxes. I made a note to remember this joint. It was better for working out than the jerry-rigged gym I'd set up in an old auto wrecking yard. A guy has to keep in shape, if he's going to be a solo.

She was out of her disguise. Standing there in the skin, shivering. Yeah, it was chilly, and I could see a pattern of chicken-skin all over her. She was maybe five-six or -seven, with nice tits and kind of skinny legs. She was brushing out her hair. It hung way down the back. The flashlight didn't make it clear enough to tell if she had red hair or chestnut, but it wasn't blonde, which was good, and that was because I dug redheads. She had nice tits, though. I couldn't see her face, the hair was hanging down all smooth and wavy and cut off her profile.

The crap she'd been wearing was thrown around on the floor, and what she was going to put on was up on the vaulting horse. She was standing in little shoes with a kind of funny heel on them.

I couldn't move. I suddenly realized I couldn't move. She was nice, really nice. I was getting a real big kick out of just standing there and seeing the way her waist fell inward and her hips fell outward, the way the muscles at the side of her tits pulled up when she reached to the top of her head to brush all that hair down. It was really weird the kick I was getting out of standing and just staring at a chick do that. Kind of very, well, woman stuff. I liked it a lot.

I'd never ever stopped and just looked at a chick like that. All the ones I'd ever seen had been scumbags that Blood had smelled out for me, and I'd snatch'n'grabbed them. Or the big chicks in the beaver flicks. Not like this one, kind of soft and very smooth, even with the goose bumps. I could have watched her all night.

She put down the brush, and reached over and took a pair of panties off the pile of clothes and wriggled into them. Then she got her bra and put it on. I never knew the way chicks did it. She put it on backwards around her waist, and it had a hook on it. Then she slid it

around till the cups were in front, and kind of pulled it up under and scooped herself into it, first one, then the other; then she pulled the straps over her shoulder. She reached for her dress, and I nudged some of the lath and plaster aside, and grabbed the door to give it a yank.

She had the dress up over her head, and her arms up inside the material, and when she stuck her head in, and was all tangled there for a second, I yanked the door and there was a crash as chunks of wood and plaster fell out of the way, and a heavy scraping, and I jumped inside and was on her before she could get out of the dress.

She started to scream, and I pulled the dress off her with a ripping sound, and it all happened for her before she knew what that crash and scrape was all about.

Her face was wild. Just wild. Big eyes: I couldn't tell what color they were because they were in shadow. Real fine features, a wide mouth, little nose, cheekbones just like mine, real high and prominent, and a dimple in her right cheek. She stared at me really scared.

And then...and this is really weird...I felt like I should say something to her. I don't know what. Just something. It made me uncomfortable, to see her scared, but what the hell could I do about *that*, I mean, I was going to rape her, after all, and I couldn't very well tell her not to be shrinky about it. She was the one cumup, after all. But even so, I wanted to say hey, don't be scared, I just want to lay you. (That never happened before. I never wanted to say anything to a chick, just get in, and that was that.)

But it passed, and I put my leg behind hers and tripped her back, and she went down in a pile. I leveled the .45 at her, and her mouth kind of opened in a little o shape. "Now I'm gonna go over there and get one of them wrestling mats, so it'll be better, comfortable, uh-huh? You make a move off that floor and I shoot a leg out from under you, and you'll get screwed just the same, except you'll be without a leg." I waited for her to let me know she was onto what I was saying, and she finally nodded real slow, so I kept the automatic on her, and went over to the big dusty stack of mats, and pulled one off.

I dragged it over to her, and flipped it so the cleaner side was up, and used the muzzle of the .45 to maneuver her onto it. She just sat there on the mat, with her hands behind her, and her knees bent, and stared at me.

I unzipped my pants and started pulling them down off one side, when I caught her looking at me real funny. I stopped with the jeans. "What're you lookin' at?"

I was mad. I didn't know why I was mad, but I was.

"What's your name?" she asked. Her voice was very soft, and kind

of furry, like it came up through her throat that was all lined with fur or something.

She kept looking at me, waiting for me to answer.

“Vic,” I said. She looked like she was waiting for more.

“Vic what?”

I didn’t know what she meant for a minute, then I did. “Vic. Just Vic. That’s all.”

“Well, what’re your mother and father’s names?”

Then I started laughing, and working my jeans down again. “Boy, are you a dumb bitch,” I said, and laughed some more. She looked hurt. It made me mad again. “Stop lookin’ like that, or I’ll bust out your teeth!”

She folded her hands in her lap.

I got the pants around my ankles. They wouldn’t come off over the sneakers. I had to balance on one foot and scuff the sneaker off the other foot. It was tricky, keeping the .45 on her and getting the sneaker off at the same time. But I did it.

I was standing there buck-naked from the waist down and she had sat forward a little, her legs crossed, hands still in her lap. “Get that stuff off,” I said.

She didn’t move for a second, and I thought she was going to give me trouble. But then she reached around behind and undid the bra. Then she tipped back and slipped the panties off her ass.

Suddenly, she didn’t look scared any more. She was watching me very close and I could see her eyes were blue now. Now this is the really weird thing...

I couldn’t do it. I mean, not exactly. I mean, I *wanted* to fuck her, see, but she was all soft and pretty and she kept *looking* at me, and no solo I ever met would believe me, but I heard myself *talking* to her, still standing there like some kind of wetbrain, one sneaker off and jeans down around my ankles. “What’s *your* name?”

“Quilla June Holmes.”

“That’s a weird name.”

“My mother says it’s not that uncommon, back in Oklahoma.”

“That where your folks come from?”

She nodded. “Before the Third War.”

“They must be pretty old by now.”

“They are, but they’re okay. I guess.”

We were just frozen there, talking to each other. I could tell she was cold, because she was shivering. “Well,” I said, sort of getting ready to drop down beside her, “I guess we better—”

Damn it! That damned Blood! Right at that moment he came crashing in from outside. Came skidding through the lath, and plaster,

raising dust, slid along on his ass till he got to us. "Now what?" I demanded.

"Who're you talking to?" the girl asked.

"Him. Blood."

"*The dog!?!?*"

Blood stared at her and then ignored her. He started to say something but the girl interrupted him. "Then it's true what they say...you can all talk to animals..."

"You going to listen to her all night, or do you want to hear why I came in?"

"Okay, why're you here?"

"You're in trouble, Albert."

"Come on, forget the mickeymouse. What's up?"

Blood twisted his head toward the front door of the YMCA. "Roverpak. Got the building surrounded. I make it fifteen or twenty, maybe more."

"How the hell'd they know we was here?"

Blood looked chagrined. He dropped his head.

"Well?"

"Some other mutt must've smelled her in the theater."

"Great."

"Now what?"

"Now we stand 'em off, that's what. You got any better suggestions?"

"Just one."

I waited. He grinned.

"Pull your pants up."

## IV

The girl, this Quilla June, was pretty safe. I made her a kind of a shelter out of wrestling mats, maybe a dozen of them. She wouldn't get hit by a stray bullet, and if they didn't go right for her, they wouldn't find her. I climbed one of the ropes hanging down from the girders and laid out up there with the Browning and a couple of handfuls of reloads. I wished to God I'd had an automatic, a bren or a Thompson. I checked the .45, made sure it was full, with one in the chamber, and set the extra clips down on the girder. I had a clear line-of-fire all around the gym.

Blood was lying in shadow right near the front door. He'd suggested I try and pick off any dogs with the roverpak first, if I could. That would allow him to operate freely.

That was the least of my worries.

I'd wanted to hole up in another room, one with only a single

entrance, but I had no way of knowing if the rovers were already in the building, so I did the best I could with what I had.

Everything was quiet. Even that Quilla June. It'd taken me valuable minutes to convince her she'd damned well better hole up and not make any noise; she was better off with me than with twenty of *them*. "If you ever wanna see your mommy and daddy again," I warned her. After that she didn't give me no trouble, packing her in with mats.

Quiet.

Then I heard two things, both at the same time. From back in the swimming pool I heard boots crunching plaster. Very soft. And from one side of the front door, I heard a tinkle of metal striking wood. So they were going to try a yoke. Well, I was ready.

Quiet again.

I sighted the Browning on the door to the pool room. It was still open from when I'd come through. Figure him at maybe five-ten, and drop the sights a foot and a half, and I'd catch him in the chest. I'd learned long ago you don't try for the head. Go for the widest part of the body: the chest and stomach. The trunk.

Suddenly, outside, I heard a dog bark, and part of the darkness near the front door detached itself and moved inside the gym. Directly opposite Blood. I didn't move the Browning.

The rover at the front door moved a step along the wall, away from Blood. Then he cocked back his arm and threw something—a rock, a piece of metal, something—across the room to draw fire. I didn't move the Browning.

When the thing he'd thrown hit the floor, two rovers jumped out of the swimming pool door, one on either side of it, rifles down, ready to spray. Before they could open up, I'd squeezed off the first shot, tracked across and put a second shot into the other one. They both went down. Dead hits, right in the heart. Bang, they were down, neither one moved.

The mother by the door turned to split, and Blood was on him. Just like that, out of the darkness, riiiiip!

Blood leaped, right over the crossbar of the guy's rifle held at ready, and sank his fangs into the rover's throat. The guy screamed, and Blood dropped, carrying a piece of the guy with him. The guy was making awful bubbling sounds and went down on one knee. I put a slug into his head, and he fell forward.

It went quiet again.

Not bad. Not bad atall atall. Three takeouts and they still didn't know our positions. Blood had fallen back into the murk by the entrance. He didn't say a thing, but I knew what he was thinking:

maybe that was three out of seventeen, or three out of twenty, or twenty-two. No way of knowing; we could be faced-off in here for a week and never know if we'd gotten them all, or some, or none. They could go and get poured full again, and I'd find myself run out of slugs and no food and that girl, that Quilla June, crying and making me divide my attention, and daylight—and they'd be still laying out there, waiting till we got hungry enough to do something dumb, or till we ran out of slugs; and then they'd cloud up and rain all over us.

A rover came dashing straight through the front door at top speed, took a leap, hit on his shoulders, rolled, came up going in a different direction, and snapped off three rounds into different corners of the room before I could track him with the Browning. By that time he was close enough under me where I didn't have to waste a .22 slug. I picked up the .45 without a sound and blew the back off his head. Slug went in neat, came out and took most of his hair with it. He fell right down.

"Blood! The rifle!"

Came out of the shadows, grabbed it up in his mouth and dragged it over to the pile of wrestling mats in the far corner. I saw an arm poke out from the mass of mats, and a hand grabbed the rifle, dragged it inside. Well, it was at least safe there, till I needed it. Brave little bastard: he scuttled over to the dead rover and started worrying the ammo bandolier off his body. It took him a while; he could have been picked off from the doorway or outside one of the windows, but he did it. Brave little bastard. I had to remember to get him something good to eat when we got out of this. I smiled, up there in the darkness: if we got out of this, I wouldn't have to worry about getting him something tender. It was lying all over the floor of that gymnasium.

Just as Blood was dragging the bandolier back into the shadows, two of them tried it with their dogs. They came through a ground floor window, one after another, hitting and rolling and going in opposite directions, as the dogs—a mother-ugly akita, big as a house, and a Doberman bitch the color of a turd—shot through the front door and split in the unoccupied two directions. I caught one of the dogs, the akita, with the .45, and it went down thrashing. The Doberman was all over Blood.

But firing, I'd given away my position. One of the rovers fired from the hip and .30-06 soft-nosed slugs spanged off the girders around me. I dropped the automatic, and it started to slip off the girder as I reached for the Browning. I made a grab for the .45 and that was the only thing saved me. I fell forward to clutch at it, it slipped away and hit the gym floor with a crash, and the rover fired at where I'd been. But I was flat on the girder, arm dangling, and the crash startled him. He fired at the sound, and right at that instant I heard another shot



from a Winchester, and the other rover, who'd made it safe into the shadows, fell forward holding a big pumping hole in his chest. That Quilla June had shot him, from behind the mats.

I didn't even have time to figure out what the fuck was happening...Blood was rolling around with the Doberman and the sounds they were making were awful...the rover with the .30-06 chipped off another shot and hit the muzzle of the Browning, protruding over the side of the girder, and wham it was gone, falling down. I was naked up there without clout, and the sonofabitch was hanging back in shadow waiting for me.

Another shot from the Winchester, and the rover fired right into the mats. She ducked back behind, and I knew I couldn't count on her for anything more. But I didn't need it; in that second, while he was focused on her, I grabbed the climbing rope, flipped myself over the girder, and howling like a burnpit-screamer, went sliding down, feeling the rope cutting my palms. I got down far enough to swing, and kicked off. I swung back and forth, whipping my body three different ways each time, swinging out and over, way over, each time. The sonofabitch kept firing, trying to track a trajectory, but I kept spinning out of his line of fire. Then he was empty, and I kicked back as hard as I could, and came zooming in toward his corner of shadows, and let loose all at once and went ass-over-end into the corner, and there he was, and I went right into him and he spanged off the wall, and I was on top of him, digging my thumbs into his eyesockets. He was screaming and the dogs were screaming and that girl was screaming and I pounded the motherfucker's head against the floor till he stopped moving, then I grabbed up the empty .30-06 and whipped his head till I knew he wasn't gonna give me no more aggravation.

Then I found the .45 and shot the Doberman.

Blood got up and shook himself off. He was cut up bad. "Thanks," he mumbled, and went over to lie down in the shadows, to lick himself off.

I went and found that Quilla June, and she was crying. About all the guys we'd killed. Mostly about the one *she'd* killed. I couldn't get her to stop bawling so I cracked her across the face and told her she'd saved my life, and that helped some.

Blood came dragassing over. "How're we going to get out of this, Albert?"

"Let me think."

I thought and knew it was hopeless. No matter how many we got, there'd be more. And it was a matter of *macho* now. Their honor.

"How about a fire?" Blood suggested.

“Get away while it’s burning?” I shook my head. “They’ll have the place staked-out all around. No good.”

“What if we don’t leave? What if we burn up with it?”

I looked at him. Brave...and smart as hell.

## V

We gathered all the lumber and mats and scaling ladders and vaulting boxes and benches and anything else that would burn, and piled the garbage against a wooden divider at one end of the gym. Quilla June found a can of kerosene in a storeroom, and we set fire to the whole damn pile. Then we followed Blood to the place he’d found for us. The boiler room way down under the YMCA. We all climbed into the empty boiler, and dogged down the door, leaving a release vent open for air. We had one mat in there with us, and all the ammo we could carry, and the extra rifles and sidearms the rovers’d had on them.

“Can you catch anything?” I asked Blood.

“A little. Not much. I’m reading one guy. The building’s burning good.”

“You be able to tell when they split?”

“Maybe. *If* they split.”

I settled back. Quilla June was shaking from all that had happened. “Just take it easy,” I told her. “By morning the place’ll be down around our ears, and they’ll go through the rubble and find a lot of dead meat, and maybe they won’t look too hard for a chick’s body. And everything’ll be all right...if we don’t get choked off in here.”

She smiled, very thin, and tried to look brave. She was okay, that one. She closed her eyes and settled back on the mat and tried to sleep. I was beat. I closed my eyes, too.

“Can you handle it?” I asked Blood.

“I suppose. You better sleep.”

I nodded, eyes still closed, and fell on my side. I was out before I could think about it.

When I came back, I found the girl, that Quilla June, snuggled up under my armpit, her arm around my waist, dead asleep. I could hardly breathe. It was like a furnace; hell, it *was* a furnace. I reached out a hand and the wall of the boiler was so damned hot I couldn’t touch it. Blood was up on the mattress with us. That mat had been the only thing’d kept us from being singed good. He was asleep, head buried in his paws. She was asleep, still naked.

I put a hand on her tit. It was warm. She stirred and cuddled into me closer. I got a hard-on.

Managed to get my pants off, and rolled on top of her. She woke

up fast when she felt me pry her legs apart, but it was too late by then. “Don’t...stop...what are you doing...no, don’t...”

But she was half-asleep, and weak, and I don’t think she really wanted to fight me anyhow.

She cried when I broke her, of course, but after that it was okay. There was blood all over the wrestling mat. And Blood just kept sleeping.

It was really different. Usually, when I’d get Blood to track something down for me, it’d be grab it and punch it and pork it and get away fast before something bad could happen. But when she came, she rose up off the mat, and hugged me around the back so hard I thought she’d crack my ribs, and then she settled back down slow slow slow, like I do when I’m doing leg-lifts in the makeshift gym I rigged in the auto wrecking yard. And her eyes were closed, and she was relaxed-looking. And happy. I could tell.

We did it a lot of times, and after a while it was her idea, but I didn’t say no. And then we lay out side-by-side and talked.

She asked me about how it was with Blood, and I told her how the skirmisher dogs had gotten telepathic, and how they’d lost the ability to hunt food for themselves, so the solos and roverpaks had to do it for them, and how dogs like Blood were good at finding chicks for solos like me. She didn’t say anything to that.

I asked her about what it was like where she lived, in one of the downunders.

“It’s nice. But it’s always very quiet. Everyone is very polite to everyone else. It’s just a small town.”

“Which one you live in?”

“Topeka. It’s real close to here.”

“Yeah, I know. The access dropshaft is only about half a mile from here. I went out there once, to take a look around.”

“Have you ever been in a downunder?”

“No. But I don’t guess I want to be, either.”

“Why? It’s very nice. You’d like it.”

“Shit.”

“That’s very crude.”

“*I’m* very crude.”

“Not all the time.”

I was getting mad. “Listen, you ass, what’s the matter with you? I grabbed you and pushed you around, I raped you half a dozen times, so what’s so good about me, huh? What’s the matter with you, don’t you even have enough smarts to know when somebody’s—”

She was smiling at me. “I didn’t mind. I liked doing it. Want to do it again?”

I was really shocked. I moved away from her. "What the hell is wrong with you? Don't you know that a chick from a downunder like you can be really mauled by solos? Don't you know chicks get warnings from their parents in the downunders, 'Don't cumup, you'll get snagged by them dirty, hairy, slobbering solos!' Don't you know that?"

She put her hand on my leg and started moving it up, the fingertips just brushing my thigh. I got another hard-on. "My parents never said that about solos," she said. Then she pulled me over her again, and kissed me, and I couldn't stop from getting in her again.

God, it just went on like that for hours. After a while Blood turned around and said, "I'm not going to keep pretending I'm asleep. I'm hungry. And I'm hurt."

I tossed her off me—she was on top by this time—and examined him. The Doberman had taken a good chunk out of his right ear, and there was a rip right down his muzzle, and blood-matted fur on one side. He was a mess, "Jesus, man, you're a mess," I said.

"You're no fucking rose garden yourself, Albert!" he snapped. I pulled my hand back.

"Can we get out of here?" I asked him.

He cast around, and then shook his head. "I can't get any readings. Must be a pile of rubble on top of this boiler. I'll have to go out and scout."

We kicked that around for a while, and finally decided if the building was razed, and had cooled a little, the roverpak would have gone through the ashes by now. The fact that they hadn't tried the boiler indicated that we were probably buried pretty good. Either that, or the building was still smoldering overhead. In which case, they'd still be out there, waiting to sift the remains.

"Think you can handle it, the condition you're in?"

"I guess I'll *have* to, won't I?" Blood said. He was really surly. "I mean, what with you busy coitus-ing your brains out, there won't be much left for staying alive, will there?"

I sensed real trouble with him. He didn't like Quilla June. I moved around him and undogged the boiler hatch. It wouldn't open. So I braced my back against the side, and jacked my legs up, and gave it a slow, steady shove.

Whatever had fallen against it from outside resisted for a minute, then started to give, then tumbled away with a crash. I pushed the door open all the way, and looked out. The upper floors had fallen in on the basement, but by the time they'd given, they'd been mostly cinder and lightweight rubble. Everything was smoking out there. I could see daylight through the smoke.

I slipped out, burning my hands on the outside lip of the hatch.

Blood followed. He started to pick his way through the debris. I could see that the boiler had been almost completely covered by the gunk that had dropped from above. Chances were good the roverpak had taken a fast look, figured we'd been fried, and moved on. But I wanted Blood to run a recon anyway. He started off, but I called him back. He came.

"What is it?"

I looked down at him. "I'll tell you what it is, man. You're acting very shitty."

"Sue me."

"Goddammit, dog, what's got your ass up?"

"Her. That nit chick you've got in there."

"So what? Big deal...I've had chicks before."

"Yeah, but never any that hung on like this one. I warn you, Albert, she's going to make trouble."

"Don't be dumb!" He didn't reply. Just looked at me with anger and then limped off to check out the scene. I crawled back inside and dogged the hatch. She wanted to make it again. I said I didn't want to; Blood had brought me down. I was bugged. And I didn't know which one to be pissed off at.

But God she was pretty.

She kind of pouted and settled back with her arms wrapped around her. "Tell me some more about the downunder," I said.

At first she was cranky, wouldn't say much, but after a while she opened up and started talking freely. I was learning a lot. I figured I could use it some time, maybe.

There were only a couple of hundred downunders in what was left of the United States and Canada. They'd been sunk on the sites of wells or mines or other kinds of deep holes. Some of them, out in the west, were in natural cave formations. They went way down, maybe two to five miles. They were like big caissons, stood on end. And the people who'd settled them were squares of the worst kind. Southern Baptists, Fundamentalists, lawanorder goofs, real middle-class squares with no taste for the wild life. And they'd gone back to a kind of life that hadn't existed for a hundred and fifty years. They'd gotten the last of the scientists to do the work, invent the how and why, and then they'd run them out. They didn't want any progress, they didn't want any dissent, they didn't want anything that would make waves. They'd had enough of that. The best time in the world had been just before the First War, and they figured if they could keep it like that, they could live quiet lives and survive. Shit! I'd go nuts in one of the downunders.

Quilla June smiled, and snuggled up again, and this time I didn't

turn her off. She started touching me again, down there and all over, and then she said, "Vic?"

"Uh-huh."

"Have you ever been in love?"

"What?"

"In love? Have you ever been in love with a girl?"

"Well, I damn well guess I haven't!"

"Do you know what love is?"

"Sure. I guess I do."

"But if you've never been in love...?"

"Don't be dumb. I mean, I've never had a bullet in the head, and I know I wouldn't like it."

"You don't know what love is, I'll bet."

"Well, if it means living in a downunder, I guess I just don't wanna find out." We didn't go on with the conversation much after that. She pulled me down and we did it again. And when it was over, I heard Blood scratching at the boiler. I opened the hatch, and he was standing out there. "All clear," he said.

"You sure?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm sure. Put your pants on," he said it with a sneer in the tone, "and come on out here. We have to talk some stuff."

I looked at him, and he wasn't kidding. I got my jeans and sneakers on, and climbed down out of the boiler.

He trotted ahead of me, away from the boiler over some blacksoot beams, and outside the gym. It was down. Looked like a rotted stump tooth.

"Now what's lumbering you?" I asked him.

He scampered up on a chunk of concrete till he was almost nose level with me.

"You're going dumb on me, Vic."

I knew he was serious. No Albert shit, straight Vic. "How so?"

"Last night, man. We could have cut out of there and left her for them. *That* would have been smart."

"I wanted her."

"Yeah, I know. That's what I'm talking about. It's today now, not last night. You've had her about a half a hundred times. Why're we hanging around?"

"I want some more."

Then he got angry. "Yeah, well, listen, chum...*I* want a few things myself. I want something to eat, and I want to get rid of this pain in my side, and I want away from this turf. Maybe they *don't* give up this easy."

"Take it easy. We can handle all that. Don't mean she can't go with

us.”

“Doesn’t mean,” he corrected me. “And so *that’s* the new story. Now we travel three, is that right?”

I was getting really uptight myself. “You’re starting to sound like a damn poodle!”

“And you’re starting to sound like a boxer.”

I hauled back to crack him one. He didn’t move. I dropped the hand. I’d never hit Blood. I didn’t want to start now.

“Sorry,” he said, softly.

“That’s okay.”

But we weren’t looking at each other.

“Vic, man, you’ve got a responsibility to me, you know.”

“You don’t have to tell me that.”

“Well, I guess maybe I do. Maybe I have to remind you of some stuff. Like the time that burnpit-screamer came up out of the street and made a grab for you.”

I shuddered. The motherfucker’d been green. Righteous stone green, glowing like fungus. My gut heaved, just thinking.

“And I went for him, right?”

I nodded. Right, mutt, right.

“And I could have been burned bad, and died, and that would’ve been all of it for me, right or wrong, isn’t that true?” I nodded again. I was getting pissed off proper. I didn’t like being made to feel guilty. It was a fifty-fifty with Blood and me. He knew that. “But I did it, right?” I remembered the way the green thing had screamed. Christ, it was all ooze and eyelashes.

“Okay, okay, don’t hanger me.”

“*Harangue*, not hanger.”

“Well, WHATEVER!” I shouted. “Just knock off the crap, or we can forget the whole fucking arrangement!”

Then Blood blew. “Well, maybe we *should*, you simple *dumb putz*!”

“What’s a *putz*, you little turd...is that something bad...yeah, it must be...you watch your fucking mouth, son of a bitch; or I’ll kick your ass!”

We sat there and didn’t talk for fifteen minutes. Neither one of us knew which way to go.

Finally, I backed off a little. I talked soft and I talked slow. I was about up to here with him, but told him I was going to do right by him, like I always had, and he threatened me, saying I’d damned well better because there were a couple of very hip solos making it around the city, and they’d be delighted to have a sharp tail-scent like him. I told him I didn’t like being threatened, and he’d better watch his fucking step or I’d break his leg. He got furious and stalked off. I said

screw you and went back to the boiler to take it out on that Quilla June again.

But when I stuck my head inside the boiler, she was waiting, with a pistol one of the dead rovers had supplied. She hit me good and solid over the right eye with it, and I fell straight forward across the hatch, and was out cold.

## VI

"I told you she was no good." He watched me as I swabbed out the cut with disinfectant from my kit, and painted the gash with iodine. He smirked when I flinched.

I put away the stuff, and rummaged around in the boiler, gathering up all the spare ammo I could carry, and ditching the Browning in favor of the heavier .30-06. Then I found something that must've slipped out of her clothes.

It was a little metal plate, about three inches long and an inch-and-a-half high. It had a whole string of numbers on it, and there were holes in it, in random patterns. "What's this?" I asked Blood.

He looked at it, sniffed it.

"Must be an identity card of some kind. Maybe it's what she used to get out of the downunder."

That made my mind up.

I jammed it in a pocket and started out. Toward the access dropshaft.

"Where the hell are you going?" Blood yelled after me.

"Come on back, you'll get killed out there!"

"I'm hungry, dammit! I'm wounded!"

"Albert, you sonofabitch! Come back here!"

I kept right on walking. I was gonna find that bitch and brain her. Even if I had to go downunder to find her.

It took me an hour to walk to the access dropshaft leading down to Topeka. I thought I saw Blood following, but hanging back a ways. I didn't give a damn. I was mad.

Then, there it was. A tall, straight, featureless pillar of shining black metal. It was maybe twenty feet in diameter, perfectly flat on top, disappearing straight into the ground. It was a cap, that was all. I walked straight up to it, and fished around in my pocket for that metal card. Then something was tugging at my right pants leg.

"Listen, you moron, you can't go down there!"

I kicked him off, but he came right back.

"*Listen to me!*"

I turned around and stared at him.

Blood sat down; the powder puffed up around him. "Albert..."

"My name is Vic, you little eggsucker."



“Okay, okay, no fooling around. Vic.” His tone softened. “Vic. Come on, man.” He was trying to get through to me. I was really boiling, but he was trying to make sense. I shrugged, and crouched down beside him.

“Listen, man,” Blood said, “this chick has bent you way out of shape. You *know* you can’t go down there. It’s all square and settled, and they know everyone; they hate solos. Enough roverpaks have raided downunder, and raped their women, and stolen their food, they’ll have defenses set up. They’ll *kill* you, Vic!”

“What the hell do you care? You’re always saying you’d be better off without me.” He sagged at that.

“Vic, we’ve been together almost three years. Good and bad. But this can be the worst. I’m scared, man. Scared you won’t come back. And I’m hungry, and I’ll have to go find some dude who’ll take me on...and you know most solos are in paks now, I’ll be low mutt. I’m not that young any more. And I’m hurt pretty bad.”

I could dig it. He was talking sense. But all I could think of was how that bitch, that Quilla June, had rapped me. And then there were images of her soft tits, and the way she made little sounds when I was in her, and I shook my head, and knew I had to go get even.

“I got to do it, Blood. *I got to.*”

He breathed deep and sagged a little more. He knew it was useless. “You don’t even see what she’s done to you, Vic. That metal card, it’s too easy, as if she *wanted* you to follow.”

I got up. “I’ll try to get back quick. Will you wait...?”

He was silent a long while, and I waited. Finally, he said, “For a while. Maybe I’ll be here, maybe not.”

I understood. I turned around and started walking around the pillar of black metal. Finally I found a slot in the pillar, and slipped the metal card into it. There was a soft humming sound, then a section of the pillar dilated. I hadn’t even seen the lines of the sections. A circle opened and I took a step through. I turned and there was Blood, watching me. We looked at each other, all the while that pillar was humming.

“So long, Vic.”

“Take care of yourself, Blood.”

“Hurry back.”

“Do my best.”

“Yeah. Right.”

Then I turned around and stepped inside. The access portal irised closed behind me.

I should have known. I should have suspected. Sure, every once in a while a chick came up to see what it was like on the surface, what had happened to the cities; sure, it happened. Why, I'd believed her when she'd told me, cuddled up beside me in that steaming boiler, that she'd wanted to see what it was like when a girl did it with a guy, that all the flicks she'd seen in Topeka were sweet and solid and dull, and the girls in her school'd talked about beaver flicks, and one of them had a little eight-page comic book and she'd read it with wide eyes...sure, I'd believed her. It was logical. I should have suspected something when she left that metal I.D. plate behind. It was too easy. Blood'd tried to tell me. Dumb? Yeah!

The second that access iris swirled closed behind me, the humming got louder, and some cool light grew in the walls. Wall. It was a circular compartment with only two sides to the wall: inside and *outside*. The wall pulsed up light and the humming got louder, and the deckplate I was standing on dilated just the way the outside port had done. But I was standing there, like a mouse in a cartoon, and as long as I didn't look down I was cool, I wouldn't fall.

Then I started settling. Dropped through the floor, the iris closed overhead, I was dropping down the tube, picking up speed but not too much, just dropping steadily. Now I knew what a dropshaft was.

Down and down I went and every once in a while I'd see something like 10 LEV or ANTIPOLL 55 or BREEDER-CON or PUMP SE 6 on the wall, faintly I could make out the sectioning of an iris... but I never stopped dropping.

Finally, I dropped all the way to the bottom, and there was TOPEKA CITY LIMITS POP. 22,860 on the wall, and I settled down without any strain, bending a little from the knees to cushion the impact, but even that wasn't much.

I used the metal plate again, and the iris—a much bigger one this time—swirled open, and I got my first look at a downunder.

It stretched away in front of me, twenty miles to the dim shining horizon of tin can metal where the wall behind me curved and curved and curved till it made one smooth, encircling circuit and came back around around around to where I stood, staring at it. I was down at the bottom of a big metal tube that stretched up to a ceiling an eighth of a mile overhead, twenty miles across. And in the bottom of that tin can, someone had built a town that looked for all the world like a photo out of one of the water-logged books in the library on the surface. I'd seen a town like this in the books. Just like this. Neat little houses, and curvy little streets, and trimmed lawns, and a business section and everything else that a Topeka would have.

Except a sun, except birds, except clouds, except rain, except snow,

except cold, except wind, except ants, except dirt, except mountains, except oceans, except big fields of grain, except stars, except the moon, except forests, except animals running wild, except...

Except freedom.

They were canned down here, like dead fish. Canned.

I felt my throat tighten up. I wanted to get out. Out! I started to tremble, my hands were cold and there was sweat on my forehead. This had been insane, coming down here. I had to get out. *Out!*

I turned around to get back in the dropshaft, and then it grabbed me.

That bitch Quilla June! I shoulda suspected!

The thing was low, and green, and boxlike, and had cables with mittens on the ends instead of arms, and it rolled on tracks, and it grabbed me.

It hoisted me up on its square flat top, holding me with them mittens on the cables, and I couldn't move, except to try kicking at the big glass eye in the front, but it didn't do any good. It didn't bust. The thing was only about four feet high, and my sneakers almost reached the ground, but not quite, and it started moving off into Topeka, hauling me along with it.

People were all over the place. Sitting in rockers on their front porches, raking their lawns, hanging around the gas station, sticking pennies in gumball machines, painting a white stripe down the middle of the road, selling newspapers on a corner, listening to an oompah band on a shell in a park, playing hopscotch and pussy-in-the-corner, polishing a fire engine, sitting on benches reading, washing windows, pruning bushes, tipping hats to ladies, collecting milk bottles in wire carrying-racks, grooming horses, throwing a stick for a dog to retrieve, diving into a communal swimming pool, chalking vegetable prices on a slate outside a grocery, walking hand-in-hand with a girl, all of them watching me go past on that metal motherfucker.

I could hear Blood speaking, saying just what he'd said before I'd entered the dropshaft: *It's all square and settled and they know everyone; they hate solos. Enough roverpaks have raided downunders, and raped their women and stolen their food, they'll have defenses set up. They'll kill you, Vic!*

Thanks, mutt.

Goodbye.

## VIII

The green box tracked through the business section and turned in

at a shopfront with the words BETTER BUSINESS BUREAU on the window. It rolled right inside the open door, and there were half a dozen men and old men and very old men in there, waiting for me. Also a couple of women. The green box stopped.

One of them came over and took the metal plate out of my hand. He looked at it, then turned around and gave it to the oldest of the old men, a withered toad wearing baggy pants and a green eyeshade and garters that held up the sleeves of his striped shirt. "Quilla June, Lew," the guy said to the old man. Lew took the metal plate and put it in the top left drawer of a rolltop desk. "Better take his guns, Aaron," the old coot said. And the guy who'd taken the plate cleaned me.

"Let him loose, Aaron," Lew said.

Aaron stepped around the back of the green box and something clicked, and the cable-mittens sucked back inside the box, and I got down off the thing. My arms were numb where the box had held me. I rubbed one, then the other, and I glared at them.

"Now, boy..." Lew started.

"Suck wind, asshole!"

The women blanched. The men tightened their faces.

"I told you it wouldn't work," another of the old men said to Lew.

"Bad business, this," said one of the younger ones.

Lew leaned forward in his straight-back chair and pointed a crumbled finger at me. "Boy, you better be nice."

"I hope all your fuckin' children are hare-lipped!"

"This is no good, Lew!" another man said.

"Guttersnipe," a woman with a beak snapped.

Lew stared at me. His mouth was a nasty little black line. I knew the sonofabitch didn't have a tooth in his crummy head that wasn't rotten and smelly. He stared at me with vicious little eyes. God, he was ugly, like a toad ready to snaffle a fly off the wall with his tongue. He was getting set to say something I wouldn't like. "Aaron, maybe you'd better put the sentry back on him." Aaron moved to the green box.

"Okay, hold it," I said, holding up my hand.

Aaron stopped, looked at Lew, who nodded. Then Lew leaned real far forward again, and aimed that bird-claw at me. "You ready to behave yourself, son?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"You'd better be dang sure."

"Okay. I'm *dang* sure. Also *fuckin'* sure!"

"And you'll watch your mouth."

I didn't reply. Old coot.

"You're a bit of an experiment for us, boy. We tried to get one of

you down here other ways. Sent up some good folks to capture one of you little scuts, but they never came back. Figgered it was best to lure you down to us.”

I sneered. That Quilla June. I’d take care of her!

One of the women, a little younger than Bird-Beak, came forward and looked into my face. “Lew, you’ll never get this one to cow-tow. He’s a filthy little killer. Look at those eyes.”

“How’d you like the barrel of a rifle jammed up your ass, bitch?” She jumped back. Lew was angry again. “Sorry,” I said real quickly, “I don’t like bein’ called names. Macho, y’know?”

He settled back and snapped at the woman. “Mez, leave him alone. I’m tryin’ to talk a bit of sense here. You’re only making it worse.”

Mez went back and sat with the others. Some Better Business Bureau these creeps were!

“As I was saying, boy: you’re an experiment for us. We’ve been down here in Topeka close to thirty years. It’s nice down here. Quiet, orderly, nice people, who respect each other, no crime, respect for the elders, and just all around a good place to live. We’re growin’ and we’re prosperin’.”

I waited.

“But, well, we find now that some of our folks can’t have no more babies, and the women that do, they have mostly girls. We need some men. Certain special kind of men.”

I started laughing. This was too good to be true. They wanted me for stud service. I couldn’t stop laughing.

“Crude!” one of the women said, scowling.

“This’s awkward enough for us, boy, don’t make it no harder.” Lew was embarrassed.

Here I’d spent most of Blood’s and my time aboveground hunting up tail, and down here they wanted me to service the local ladyfolk. I sat down on the floor and laughed till tears ran down my cheeks.

Finally, I got up and said, “Sure. Okay. But if I do, there’s a couple of things *I* want.”

Lew looked at me close.

“The first thing I want is that Quilla June. I’m gonna fuck her blind, and then I’m gonna bang her on the head the way she did me!”

They huddled for a while, then came out and Lew said, “We can’t tolerate any violence down here, but I s’pose Quilla June’s as good a place to start as any. She’s capable, isn’t she, Ira?”

A skinny, yellow-skinned man nodded. He didn’t look happy about it. Quilla June’s old man, I bet.

“Well, let’s get started,” I said. “Line ’em up.” I started to unzip my jeans.

The women screamed, the men grabbed me, and they hustled me off to a boarding house where they gave me a room, and they said I should get to know Topeka a little bit before I went to work because it was, uh, er, well, awkward, and they had to get the folks in town to accept what was going to have to be done...on the assumption, I suppose, that if I worked out okay they'd import a few more young bulls from aboveground and turn us loose.

So I spent some time in Topeka, getting to know the folks, seeing what they did, how they lived.

It was nice, real nice.

They rocked in rockers on the front porches, they raked their lawns, they hung around the gas station, they stuck pennies in gumball machines, they painted white stripes down the middle of the road, they sold newspapers on the corners, they listened to oompah bands in a shell in the park, they played hopscotch and pussy-in-the-corner, they polished fire engines, they sat on benches reading, they washed windows and pruned bushes, they tipped their hats to ladies, they collected milk bottles in wire carrying-racks, they groomed horses and threw sticks for their dogs to retrieve, they dove into the communal swimming pool, they chalked vegetable prices on a slate outside the grocery, they walked hand-in-hand with some of the ugliest chicks I've ever seen, *and they bored the ass offa me.*

Inside a week I was ready to scream.

I could feel that tin can closing in on me.

I could feel the weight of the earth over me.

They ate artificial shit: artificial peas and fake meat and make-believe chicken and ersatz corn and bogus bread, and it all tasted like chalk and dust to me.

Polite? Christ, you could puke from the lying, hypocritical crap they called civility. Hello Mr. This and Hello Mrs. That. And how are you? And how is little Janie? And how is business? Are you going to the sodality meeting Thursday? And I started gibbering in my room at the boarding house.

The clean, sweet, neat, lovely way they lived was enough to kill a guy. No wonder the men couldn't get it up and make babies that had balls instead of slots.

The first few days, everyone watched me like I was about to explode and cover their nice whitewashed fences with shit. But after a while, they got used to seeing me. Lew took me over to the Mercantile, and got me fitted out with a pair of bib overalls and a shirt that any solo could've spotted a mile away. That Mez, that dippy bitch who'd called me a killer, she started hanging around, finally said she wanted to cut my hair, make me look civilized. But I was hip to where she was at. Wasn't a bit of the mother in her.

“What’sa’matter, cunt,” I pinned her. “Your old man isn’t taking care of you?”

She tried to stick her fist in her mouth, and I laughed like a loon. “Go chop off *his* balls, baby. My hair stays the way it is.” She cut and run. Gone like she had a diesel tail-pipe.

It went on like that for a while. Me just walking around, them coming and feeding me, keeping all their young meat out of my way till they got the town stacked-away for what was coming with me.

Jugged like that, my mind wasn’t right for a while. I got all claustrophobed, clutched, went and sat under the porch in the dark at the rooming house. Then that passed, and I got piss-mean, snapped at them, then surly, then quiet, then just mud dull. Quiet.

Finally, I started getting hip to the possibilities of getting out of there. It began with me remembering the poodle I’d fed Blood one time. It had to come from a downunder. And it couldn’t have got up through the dropshaft. So that meant there were other ways out.

They gave me pretty much the run of the town, as long as I kept my manners around me and didn’t try anything sudden. That green sentry box was always somewhere nearby.

So I found the way out. Nothing so spectacular; it just had to be there, and I found it.

Then I found out where they kept my weapons, and I was ready. Almost.

## IX

It was a week to the day when Aaron and Lew and Ira came to get me. I was pretty goofy by that time. I was sitting out on the back porch of the boarding house, smoking a corncob pipe with my shirt off, catching some sun. Except there wasn’t no sun. Goofy.

They came around the house. “Morning, Vic,” Lew greeted me. He was hobbling along with a cane, the old fart. Aaron gave me a big smile. The kind you’d give a big black bull about to stuff his meat into a good breed cow. Ira had a look that you could chip off and use in your furnace.

“Well, howdy, Lew. Mornin’, Aaron, Ira.”

Lew seemed right pleased by that.

Oh, you lousy bastards, just you wait!

“You ’bout ready to go meet your first lady?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be, Lew,” I said, and got up.

“Cool smoke, ain’t it?” Aaron said.

I took the corncob out of my mouth. “Pure dee-light.” I smiled. I hadn’t even lit the fucking thing.

They walked me over to Marigold Street and as we came up on a

little house with yellow shutters and a white picket fence, Lew said, "This's Ira's house. Quilla June is his daughter."

"Well, land sakes," I said, wide-eyed.

Ira's lean jaw muscles jumped.

We went inside.

Quilla June was sitting on the settee with her mother, an older version of her, pulled thin as a withered muscle. "Miz Holmes," I said and made a little curtsy. She smiled. Strained, but smiled.

Quilla June sat with her feet right together, and her hands folded in her lap. There was a ribbon in her hair. It was blue.

Matched her eyes.

Something went thump in my gut.

"Quilla June," I said.

She looked up. "Mornin", Vic."

Then everyone sort of stood around looking awkward, and finally Ira began yapping and yipping about get in the bedroom and get this unnatural filth over with so they could go to Church and pray the Good Lord wouldn't Strike All Of Them Dead with a bolt of lightning in the ass, or some crap like that.

So I put out my hand, and Quilla June reached for it without looking up, and we went in the back, into a small bedroom, and she stood there with her head down.

"You didn't tell 'em, did you?" I asked.

She shook her head.

And suddenly, I didn't want to kill her at all. I wanted to hold her. Very tight. So I did. And she was crying into my chest, and making little fists beating on my back, and then she was looking up at me and running her words all together: "Oh, Vic, I'm sorry, so sorry, I didn't mean to, I had to, I was sent out to, I was so scared, and I love you, and now they've got you down here, and it isn't dirty, is it, it isn't the way my Poppa says it is, is it?"

I held her and kissed her and told her it was okay, and then I asked her if she wanted to come away with me, and she said yes yes yes she really did. So I told her I might have to hurt her Poppa to get away, and she got a look in her eyes that I knew real well.

For all her propriety, Quilla June Holmes didn't much like her prayer-shouting Poppa.

I asked her if she had anything heavy, like a candlestick or a club, and she said no. So I went rummaging around in that back bedroom and found a pair of her Poppa's socks in a bureau drawer. I pulled the big brass balls off the headboard of the bed and dropped them into the sock. I hefted it. Oh. Yeah.

She stared at me with big eyes. "What're you going to do?"



"You want to get out of here?"

She nodded.

"Then just stand back behind the door. No, wait a minute. I got a better idea. Get on the bed."

She lay down on the bed. "Okay," I said, "now pull up your skirt, pull off your pants, and spread out." She gave me a look of pure horror. "Do it," I said. "If you want out."

So she did it, and I rearranged her so her knees were bent and her legs open at the thighs, and I stood to one side of the door, and whispered to her, "Call your Poppa. Just him."

She hesitated a long moment, then she called out in a voice she didn't have to fake, "Poppa! Poppa, come here, please!" Then she clamped her eyes shut tight.

Ira Holmes came through the door, took one look at his secret desire, his mouth dropped open, I kicked the door closed behind him and walloped him as hard as I could. He squished a little, and spattered the bedspread, and went very down.

She opened her eyes when she heard the thunk! and when the stuff spattered her legs, she leaned over and puked on the floor. I knew she wouldn't be much good to me in getting Aaron into the room, so I opened the door, stuck my head around, looked worried, and said, "Aaron, would you come here a minute, please?" He looked at Lew, who was rapping with Mrs. Holmes about what was going on in the back bedroom, and when Lew nodded him on, he came into the room. He took a look at Quilla June's naked bush, at the blood on the wall and bedspread, at Ira on the floor, and opened his mouth to yell just as I whacked him. It took two more to get him down, and then I had to kick him in the chest to put him away. Quilla June was still puking.

I grabbed her by the arm and swung her up off the bed. At least she was being quiet about it, but man, did she stink.

"Come on!"

She tried to pull back, but I held on and opened the bedroom door. As I pulled her out, Lew stood up, leaning on his cane. I kicked the cane out from under the old fart and down he went in a heap. Mrs. Holmes was staring at us, wondering where her old man was. "He's back in there," I said, heading for the front door. "The Good Lord got him in the head."

Then we were out in the street, Quilla June stinking along behind me, dry-heaving and bawling and probably wondering what had happened to her underpants.

They kept my weapons in a locked case at the Better Business Bureau, and we detoured around by my boarding house where I pulled the crowbar I'd swiped from the gas station out from under the

back porch. Then we cut across behind the Grange and into the business section, and straight into the BBB. There was a clerk who tried to stop me, and I split his gourd with the crowbar. Then I pried the latch off the cabinet in Lew's office and got the .30-06 and my .45 and all the ammo, and my spike and my knife and my kit, and loaded up. By that time Quilla June was able to make some sense.

"Where we gonna go, where we gonna go, oh Poppa Poppa Popp...!"

"Hey, listen, Quilla June, Poppa me no Poppas. You said you wanted to be with me...well, I'm goin'! *Up*, baby, and if you wanna go with me, you better stick close."

She was too scared to object.

I stepped out the front of the shopfront, and there was that green box sentry, coming on like a whippet. It had its cables out, and the mittens were gone. It had hooks.

I dropped to one knee, wrapped the sling of the .30-06 around my forearm, sighted clean, and fired dead at the big eye in the front. One shot, spang!

Hit that eye, the thing exploded in a shower of sparks, and the green box swerved and went through the front window of The Mill End Shoppe, screeching and crying and showering the place with flames and sparks. Nice.

I turned around to grab Quilla June, but she was gone. I looked off down the street, and here came all the vigilantes, Lew hobbling along with his cane like some kind of weird grasshopper.

And right then the shots started. Big, booming sounds. The .45 I'd given Quilla June. I looked up, and on the porch around the second floor, there she was, the automatic down on the railing like a pro, sighting into that mob and snapping off shots like maybe Wild Bill Elliott in a '40s Republic flick.

But dumb! Mother dumb! Wasting time on that, when we had to get away.

I found the outside staircase going up there, and took it three steps at a time. She was smiling and laughing, and every time she'd pick one of those boobs out of the pack her little tonguetip would peek out of the corner of her mouth, and her eyes would get all slick and wet and wham! down the boob would go.

She was really into it.

Just as I reached her, she sighted down on her scrawny mother. I slammed the back of her head, and she missed the shot, and the old lady did a little dance-step and kept coming. Quilla June whipped her head around at me, and there was kill in her eyes. "You made me miss." The voice gave me a chill.

I took the .45 away from her. Dumb. Wasting ammunition like that.

Dragging her behind me, I circled the building, found a shed out back, dropped down onto it, and had her follow. She was scared at first, but I said, "Chick can shoot her old lady as easy as you do shouldn't be worried about a drop this small." She got out on the ledge, other side of the railing and held on. "Don't worry," I said, "you won't wet your pants. You haven't got any."

She laughed, like a bird, and dropped. I caught her, we slid down the shed door, and took a second to see if that mob was hard on us. Nowhere in sight.

I grabbed Quilla June by the arm and started off toward the south end of Topeka. It was the closest exit I'd found in my wandering, and we made it in about fifteen minutes, panting and weak as kittens.

And there it was.

A big air-intake duct.

I pried off the clamps with the crowbar, and we climbed up inside. There were ladders going up. There had to be. It figured. Repairs. Keep it clean. Had to be. We started climbing.

It took a long, long time.

Quilla June kept asking me, from down behind me, whenever she got too tired to climb, "Vic, do you love me?" I kept saying yes. Not only because I meant it. It helped her keep climbing.

## X

We came up a mile from the access dropshaft. I shot off the filter covers and the hatch bolts, and we climbed out. They should have known better down there. You don't fuck around with Jimmy Cagney.

They never had a chance.

Quilla June was exhausted. I didn't blame her. But I didn't want to spend the night out in the open; there were things out there I didn't like to think about meeting even in daylight. It was getting on toward dusk.

We walked toward the access dropshaft.

Blood was waiting.

He looked weak. But he'd waited.

I stooped down and lifted his head. He opened his eyes, and very softly he said, "Hey."

I smiled at him. Jesus, it was good to see him. "We made it back, man."

He tried to get up, but he couldn't. The wounds on him were in ugly shape. "Have you eaten?" I asked.

"No. Grabbed a lizard yesterday...or maybe it was day before. I'm hungry, Vic."

Quilla June came up then, and Blood saw her. He closed his eyes. "We'd better hurry, Vic," she said. "Please. They might come up from the dropshaft."

I tried to lift Blood. He was dead weight. "Listen, Blood, I'll leg it into the city and get some food. I'll come back quick. You just wait here."

"Don't go in there, Vic," he said. "I did a recon the day after you went down. They found out we weren't fried in that gym. I don't know how. Maybe mutts smelled our track. I've been keeping watch, and they haven't tried to come out after us. I don't blame them. You don't know what it's like out here at night, man...you don't know..."

He shivered.

"Take it easy, Blood."

"But they've got us marked lousy in the city, Vic. We can't go back there. We'll have to make it someplace else."

That put it on a different stick. We couldn't go back, and with Blood in that condition we couldn't go forward. And I knew, good as I was solo, I couldn't make it without him. And there wasn't anything out here to eat. He had to have food at once, and some medical care. I had to do something. Something good, something fast.

"Vic!" Quilla June's voice was high and whining. "Come on! He'll be all right. We have to hurry!"

I looked up at her. The sun was sinking into the darkness. Blood trembled in my arms.

She got a pouty look on her face. "If you love me, you'll come *on*!"

I couldn't make it alone out there without him. I knew it. If I loved her. She asked me, in the boiler, do you know what love is?

It was a small fire, not nearly big enough for any roverpak to spot from the outskirts of the city. No smoke. And after Blood had eaten his fill, I carried him to the air-duct a mile away, and we spent the night inside on a little ledge. I held him all night. He slept good. In the morning, I fixed him up pretty good. He'd make it; he was strong.

He ate again. There was plenty left from the night before. I didn't eat. I wasn't hungry.

We started off across the blast wasteland that morning. We'd find another city, and make it.

We had to move slow because Blood was still limping. It took a long time before I stopped hearing her calling in my head. Asking me, asking me: *do you know what love is?*

Sure I know.

A boy loves his dog.



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